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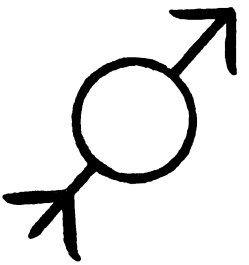

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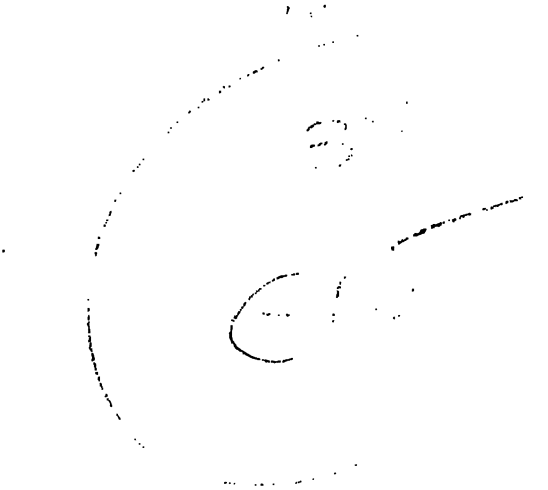

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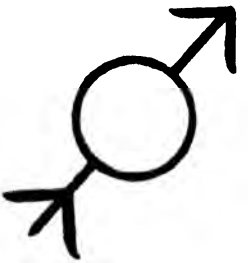

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"You speak like the scoundrel you are."

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MR SMITH:

A PART OF HIS LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

MR SMITH.

A SHORT, stout, grey man.

Mr Smith.

The butcher was disappointed that he wasn't a family. He had been led to expect that he was a family. All the time that house was building he had made up his mind that it was for a family.

There was rooms in it as ought to have been family rooms. There was rooms as meant roast-beef, and there was rooms as meant saddles of mutton and sweetbreads. In his mind's eye he had already provided the servants' hall with rounds, both fresh and salt; and treated the housekeeper to private and confidential kidneys. He had seen sick children ordered tender knuckles of veal, and growing ones strong soup. He had seen his own car at the back-door every morning of the week.

After all, it was too provoking to come down to—Mr Smith.

The butcher set the example, and the grocer and the baker were both ready enough to follow.

They were sure they thought there was a family. Somebody had told them so. They couldn't rightly remember who, but they were sure it was somebody. It might have been Mr Harrop, or it might have been Mr Jessamy.

Harrop was the innkeeper, and, with an innkeeper's independence, denied the imputation flat.

He had never said a word of the sort. He had never mentioned such a thing as a family. Leastwise it would be very queer if he had, seeing as how he had never thought it. He always knew Mr Smith was Mr Smith, a single gentleman with no encumbrances; but he must confess that, as to the gentleman himself, he had been led to expect that he was somehow or other different. Some one had told him—he couldn't rightly remember who at that moment—that he was a young, dashing spark, who took a deal of wine, and kept a many horses. Likewise, his informant had stated, he had a valet.

J. Jessamy, hairdresser and perfumer, 39 High Street, corroborated the last statement. He didn't know about his being young, but he understood that he had been one as cared about his appearance. At the very first sight of Mr Smith, with his thick iron-grey whiskers and clean-shaved lip, Jessamy threw down the box of sponges he was arranging, and exclaimed aloud, "A man can't make his bread off whiskers!"

Mrs Hunt, the doctor's wife, from her window over the way, saw the sponges fall, and caught sight of Mr Smith.

In her private mind she was very much of the innkeeper's opinion. The doctor might wish for a family, but her desires took a different form. A Mr Smith satisfied them very well, but he should have been another sort of Mr Smith.

A Mr Smith of twenty or thirty, amiable, handsome, unmarried, was the Mr Smith she had fondly hoped to welcome.

But this old gentleman? *No.*

Neither Maria nor Clare would ever look at him, she was sure of that; girls were so foolish. Those silly Tolletons would laugh at him as they did at everybody, and Maria and Clare would join in with them.

Her face grew gloomy at the prospect, as she looked after Mr Smith walking down the street.

Many pairs of eyes followed Mr Smith walking down the street that day.

He had arrived the previous night, and had not been

seen before. The disappointment was universal. This Smith was not the man for them. That was the conclusion each one arrived at for the present. The future must take care of itself.

The short, stout, grey man entered the post-office, and inquired if there were any letters for him.

"What name, sir?"

"Mr Smith."

Mr Smith got his letters, and then the postmaster came out to a lady who was sitting in her pony-carriage at the door.

"Beg pardon for keeping you, my lady; but had to get such a number for Mr Smith."

"So that is Mr Smith," thought she, taking her letters. "And very like a Mr Smith, too."

It was but a glance; but the glance which enabled her to ascertain so much, caused her to let slip a letter from the budget, and it fell on the pavement.

Mr Smith, coming out at the moment, saw it fall. Slowly and somewhat stiffly, but still before the nimble groom could anticipate him, he stooped and picked it up; then slightly raising his hat, presented it, seal uppermost, to the lady in the carriage.

Lady Sauffrenden felt a faint sensation of surprise. There was nothing in the action, of course, but there was something in the manner of performing it, which was not that of a vulgar man; and a vulgar man she had predetermined the new proprietor to be.

She had to pass the house on the Hill every time she drove into the village, and when she heard that it was being built by a Mr Smith, and that Mr Smith himself was coming to live in it, she thought she knew exactly the sort of person he would be. A short, stout, grey man, and vulgar.

Then she saw him face to face, and he answered to the portrait precisely, except—no, not vulgar, odd.

After the affair of the letter, she never called him vulgar.

Others saw the incident, but it caused no change in their opinions. It by no means altered Mrs Hunt's, for instance. Mr Smith looked none the younger when he stooped down, and his age was her only objection to him. The butcher recommenced his grumbling. What was a

Mr Smith to him? He didn't want no Mr Smiths. Mr Smith, indeed! Why, the very name Smith had a regular family sound.

A Mrs Smith, a young Smith, the Miss Smiths, Bobby Smith, Jack Smith, Joe Smith, the Smith's baby, and the Smith's governess, seemed to him only the proper Smith connection.

Then the grocer and the baker recurred afresh to their ideal, a Mr Smith of servants. Children they set little store by, except as they gave rise to servants.

Harrop lamented anew the Mr Smith of his imagination, a mixture of the stable and the cellar; and Jessamy took up his sponges with a sigh, and strove to efface from his memory the lost anticipations of waxed mustachios and scented pocket-handkerchiefs.

Dr Hunt met Mr Smith, and but that his house of cards had long before this tumbled in the dust, it would have done so on the spot.

Here was a man whom he had been looking to as the embodiment of human ailments! The Mr Smith of measles, whooping-cough, and chicken-pox; winter sore throats, and summer chills; a Mr Smith of accidents it might be; best of all, an increasing Mr Smith. The family so ardently desired by the villagers he would have been proud to present to them.

There was the man, and where was such a prospect? Tough as leather, and as unimpressible. He would neither prove a patient himself, nor take to him one who would. A place like that, too! Why, the practice of that house on the Hill ought to have been a cool hundred a-year in his pocket. Pish!

There Mr Smith was, however, be he what he might, or who he might, living in Mr Smith's house, and receiving Mr Smith's letters. There was no doubt that it was himself. If there had been the faintest shadow of a doubt, not one, but one and all, would have been glad to raise it.

There he was, think what they all might, say what they all could.

They did not want him there, but they could not turn him out. He had built his house, and he meant to come and live in it. Why he had built the house they could all understand. Was it not their own neighbourhood, and had

it its equal for advantages in England? The estate had always been a fine one; it only needed a mansion-house.

And the village, or the town, as it had grown to be, was so conveniently near; and was within an hour of London by train; and it had two daily posts and a telegraph office; a railway station, livery stables, and nursery gardens.

It was no wonder that Mr Smith should think of building the house on the Hill; but having done so, they were unreasonably ill-pleased that he should wish to come and live in it.

People said he had lived abroad. Well, why could he not have gone on living there? Others would have made the property as good a speculation for themselves, and a deal better for them as had lived there before.

One thing, however, told in favour of the new-comer. He was rich. He had not met their expectations in any other way, but he had not failed in this. He really and truly was rich. His fortune was there. It had not melted, as money usually does, when too curiously pried into.

The amount, indeed, had been difficult to settle. At first it was thirty, but it passed through the different gradations of twenty-five, and twenty, to ten thousand a-year.

His servants deponed to its being ten. Several of them had heard Mr Smith say so.

Upon investigation, it proved to have been, not Mr Smith who said so, but his lawyer. The lawyer's phrase was, "A man like you with ten thousand a-year." And this, of course, as lawyer's evidence, was even more conclusive than if it had been given by their master himself.

The money was therefore secure, and they must make what they could out of it. It at least had not cheated them. They bowed low to the fortune. Although it had been reported at thirty, it was held to have stood the test well, when proved to be ten.

CHAPTER II.

WHO WAS TO BE THE FIRST?

THE next point was, who was to call on Mr Smith?

Public expectation pointed first to the rector. But the rector, between his sore throats, his daily services, and his confidence that the new-comer would prove an orthodox parishioner, since he had cushioned and carpeted a church pew for his own particular use, was slow to fulfil the requirements of society in the present instance.

Mr Grey was a slow, but by no means a sure man to trust to. On ordinary occasions nothing else was expected from him. But then this was not quite an ordinary case. An immense amount of curiosity, conjecture, and anticipatory excitement had already been spent on the new proprietor, and it would be hard if all this outlay were to yield no return.

The sickle was therefore respectfully put into the rector's hand, and he was dumbly requested to lead the way and reap the first-fruits.

For a while he stood still with the sickle in the hand. The house on the Hill was a noble building. When he saw it first beginning to rise, a little of the parish ferment had worked itself even into his preoccupied bosom. He felt a seething of surmise as to its owner, and a bubble of anxiety lest he should prove schismatic.

But Mr Smith spoilt all.

Before he himself appeared, the church pew was applied for; and when the furniture for the house came down, the carpet and cushions for the pew came down with it.

Mr Grey felt secure, and turned him over to the curate. The curate was finishing his fortnight in Wales, and to wait for him was impossible.

The eyes of the population were therefore turned to the doctor, and if Mrs Hunt had had her way, they would have been speedily gratified.

But Mrs Hunt, who had her way, if report spoke truly, on a great many points where perhaps it might have been as well if she had not, knew that there were parts of her

dominion into which even the sovereign was sometimes refused admittance. She thought, she fancied this would be the case in the present instance; but she was brave, and she determined to risk it.

At once the doctor showed his bristles. "Call on Mr Smith, Polly? Not I. No one has called yet."

"It is so soon," suggested she.

"Soon? Of course it is. Ridiculously soon? The man hasn't been here two days. Until I have met him out, or until some reasonable time has elapsed, I shall let him alone. March up there to-day? No, no, you'll not catch Robert Hunt making such a fool of himself."

"Oh dear, doctor, where's the fool? You ought to call as the doctor, if not as a neighbour. Think if that Barton should get him!"

The doctor turned round savagely.

"Call as the doctor? I'd sooner call as the—— What do you mean by such nonsense?" cried he, pulling up with a choke. "Haven't I told you times without number that I'm not going to tout for business like a railway porter, or a cabman? If I want Mr Smith I shall call as a neighbour; if he doesn't like me as a neighbour, he needn't return it."

"I daresay he'll be among all the county people?" hinted she.

"I daresay he'll be nothing of the sort."

"Well, I saw him speaking to Lady Sauffrenden yesterday, at all events."

"Hang Lady Sauffrenden!"

"Never mind Lady Sauffrenden, doctor; the point is Mr Smith."

"What do you want with Mr Smith?"

"Only to be neighbourly, I'm sure, and—have him here sometimes, you know. With neither wife, nor sister, nor any one belonging to him, he must be often dull of an evening, and would like to come down now and then, I daresay. The girls would amuse him."

"So that's what you're after, Polly. Why, the man's as old as I am."

Having recovered from the first shock of this suspicion herself, it behoved her, if she could not dissipate the suspicion, at least to soften the shock, to her husband.

"That's not so old either, Robert. He's a fine-looking man, and a bachelor's always younger than other men."

"I don't see that. I think I'm as young-looking as Smith any day. Stout, apoplectic——"

"Oh dear, doctor, don't go and speak against him—you might just as well give him a chance. What's a few years more or less? And they do say he has twenty thousand a-year."

"No, Polly, it's ten. It has come down to ten since he arrived. However, ten would be enough for me. Humph!"

"So you see you might just as well call as other people," nodded his wife knowingly.

"If I call now, ma'am, can't you see that it means a doctor's call—a village doctor in search of patients? Do you think that that's a likely way to bring Mr Smith forward as a suitor for your daughter?" cried he, with no subterfuge of language. "I know the world a little better than you do, Mrs Hunt; it's only those who have something to get by it who rush at every new man. I'll take care Smith doesn't go past me, but I don't mean him to find that out. I'm not going to be known as the village doctor to anybody. What is the use of your fine connections if that is the only footing we have to stand upon? If I had not taken the greatest care in the world we should never have been where we are now. It is not everybody in our position who has the footing we have. Scarcely a house in the neighbourhood we don't go to, once a-year at least. I mean to call on this Mr Smith, of course; but I shall wait a little, till some of the other people have been. Then I call as a neighbour, among the other neighbours. Then you may try to hook him, if you can."

"I'm afraid the girls will laugh at him."

"What is there to laugh at?"

"I'm sure I don't know, but they are always quizzing people, as they call it. They'll say he's a regular old quiz."

"They'll be great fools, then."

"It's the Tolleton girls that set them on."

"The Tolleton girls would be glad to catch Mr Smith for one of themselves."

"That they would, Robert! That's what I say. Old Tolleton will be going and calling there to-day—see if he doesn't!"

"I met him coming out of the gate just now," said the doctor, with a grin.

"There now! Didn't I tell you? They'll have asked him to dinner as sure as eggs are eggs, and he'll be there all day long!"

"You needn't put yourself about, for they haven't done it yet, Polly. Mrs Tolleton, the old lady, is just dead, and he was telling me how they couldn't have any company just now on that account, but he had been up to call. However, Smith was out."

"As if they couldn't have waited to call, and his own mother barely buried!" cried Mrs Hunt. "The way some people will rush at everybody they think a catch, in the very face of decency!"

"It is just what you wanted me to do."

"No, indeed, doctor; there's all the difference in the world. Your mother has been dead these twenty years; there's no reason in the world why you shouldn't call at once."

"There's no reason why I should, and that's more to the purpose. Who thinks anything of Tolleton, just because he's always thrusting his card upon everybody? And if I did the same they would think still less of me. The Tolletons are a cut above us. You be patient, Polly, and I'll do the right thing at the right time."

Mrs Hunt drummed her feet upon the floor. It was hard to be patient when a few minutes before she had seemed so nearly victorious. When, too, he had not been blind to her wishes, but had understood and plainly spoken them out, yet had not, as many an unreasonable husband would have done, forbidden her to carry them into effect.

The Tolletons, if they had an end in view, generally managed to attain it, in spite of deaths and other inconveniences. Mr Smith would be there at dinner ere long, —would perhaps be intimate at Freelands before the Hunts even knew him.

The girls might laugh at Mr Smith and call him an old quiz, as she had predicted, but that was no reason why, as the doctor had rejoined, they would not be glad enough to catch him if they could.

The worst of it was, that Maria and Clare, who always did whatever the Tolleton girls did, would laugh with them

at Mr Smith, and call him an old quiz likewise, but would never be able to detect if the other prophecy also came true, and the Miss Tolletons had a serious aim beneath their pleasantry.

She was already certain that such was, or would be, the case.

If not, why had Mr Tolleton been the first to call? He always was the first to call on everybody, it was true, but it was his daughters who egged him on to it. The way those girls did manage to scratch up acquaintance with people by hook or by crook, really was disgraceful. Anybody could get good society if they chose to buffet their way into it, as they did.

There was Helen, when the autumn manœuvres were going on, driving about the heath all day long. Tea at the camp—picnics—luncheon parties at the Tolletons' every day of the week; and old Tolleton calling here and calling there, and fairly begging the young men to come and drink his wine, and eat his mutton.

Mrs Hunt did not reflect that the young men were very easy to be entreated.

The wine and the mutton may have had some share in attracting them, but undoubtedly the Miss Tolletons had still more.

They were generally spoken of as handsome and good fun; but it was shrewdly suspected that among the younger men there were not a few who, covering with such light praise the name of Helen Tolleton, went away smarting with a hidden wound.

Helen's pale face did infinitely greater damage than the more blooming countenances of her sisters. Why she was so pale, no one could imagine. She was well, she was strong, she was if anything the healthiest of the three. Exercise or excitement would bring the colour to her cheek at once; but when under the influence of neither she was pale, decidedly pale, and her cheek as well as her forehead had a soft creamy tint.

Carry and Lily thought that they excelled their sister in complexion, but they were ready to acknowledge her superiority in feature. Her blue eyes, with their long black lashes, were esteemed by the others her best point, although with careless approbation they were ready to acknowledge

the symmetry of the small high nose, and the exquisite dip in the upper lip.

They were proud of Helen's beauty, and frankly repeated her compliments, but there was one thing they did not like her to be called, and that was "delicate." Her beauty was genuine, and they had no thought of jealousy on that point, but her delicacy was a deception. She had neither Carry's headaches, nor Lily's twinges of rheumatism, and yet she added this refined touch to her other fascinations.

Helen was the one who made acquaintances for the family.

It was she who went out walking before breakfast, and met people by accident. She who brought in strangers to see papa's collection of curiosities. Her photograph-book was the show one; and the photographs contained therein were so many, and so frequently altered, that her sisters were often puzzled to account for new phenomena.

All three made button-hole bouquets in perfection, but Helen expected the first pick of the flowers. The first pick of partners for croquet was hers also; and whenever any unexceptionable young chrysalis of a husband appeared on the horizon, it was understood that Helen would be the proper wife for him.

If these privileges, however, were conceded by the younger Miss Tolletons with ready grace, they in their turn exacted demands from other young ladies.

It is not every family who possesses a distinguished beauty; and Carry and Lily felt that they might themselves have reigned as suns in lesser spheres.

Had either of them been born in the doctor's family, for example, she would have been the centre of attraction. As it was, the doctor's daughters paid due homage; and it was no more than true what Mrs Hunt alleged, that whatever the Tolleton girls did, hers would do.

She had been, she still was, proud of the Tolletons' friendship. She frequently boasted of her intimacy at Freelands. She never refused an invitation to the house, and she went there a great many times without any invitation at all; but then, you know, she thought all that was one thing, and to love one's neighbour as one's self was another.

"Those Tolleton girls are doing ours no good," was a fre-

quent remark in her mouth; but when it came to particulars, she had nothing more to say. She had that ineffective way of inveighing against things wholesale, yet never suggesting a remedy, which is at once so disagreeable and so incontrovertible. "I suppose they have been again with those Tolleton girls?" she would say, if hers were out late. "Which of the Tolleton girls did you get that thing from?" if it did not please her. Both remarks being uttered in a disparaging tone, but no definite disapprobation expressed. In consequence, Maria and Clare went on just as they had done before. It was mamma's way, and meant nothing.

They dearly loved the society of the Miss Tolletons. Their mother thought that from it they got no good, but widely different was their own opinion. They learnt, they imagined, everything from these dear friends.

Thus in their dress. Now the Miss Tolletons having fine tall well-moulded figures, and inclinations rather of the dashing than the gentle sort, affected something of a masculine style.

They wore rough tight-fitting jackets with large buttons, high plumy hats, and all sorts of belts and buckles round their waists.

Whether it were to be admired or not, the style was not one to be universally imitated. Least of all should Maria and Clare Hunt have presumed to copy.

They had no beauties of face or figure, and only soft fabrics and delicately blended colours could, at the best, have made them look neat and lady-like.

This did not meet their views at all. They wished to look trim, and bright, and sparkling, like Helen Tolleton, who always wore a background of black to set off her pale face, and to whom the addition of a scarlet or rose-coloured shawl was like paint.

Accordingly the Hunts wore black and rose-colour likewise.

They saved up their money and got sashes of the same brilliant hue. They sewed buckles on their shoes, and wore in winter furry things about their wrists and ankles.

Thus they appeared, in their own eyes, faithful copies of perfect models, but it is to be feared in the eyes of impartial spectators, a pair of extraordinarily ill-dressed and ill-looking young women.

See, Maria is just come in from her walk with these chosen companions. Her mother knows she has been with them, and is generally dissatisfied. She looks her over, and begins to peck.

"I don't like that jacket, Maria; it doesn't set well."

"Oh, mamma, I thought Miss Platt had made it so beautifully."

"No, she hasn't, or else it's the material. I can't tell which it is, but it makes you look as thick again. It may be the trimming, perhaps. I don't like its being open at the neck, either."

"Lily Tolleton says they are all being worn open at the neck now; no one ever thinks of wearing them shut."

"You'll catch your death of cold," grunts the doctor, who has not yet gone out after his conversation with his wife about Mr Smith.

"No, papa, I'm quite warm," beginning to cough at the same moment.

"Why, you have a cold already, child."

"I had that before I went out, papa. I felt it this morning when I awoke, indeed I did."

"All the more absurd to expose your throat in a cold wind. I never heard of such a thing! Now, look here, you'll have a mustard blister on to-night, all over the place; keep it on some time too, and close up that jacket before you wear it again. Do you hear? Now mind you do as I tell you. I'm not going to have my daughters lose their health for all the Lily Tolletons and fashion-books in existence."

"I can put on the blister, papa, although it is really hardly worth it, my cold is so little; but a nice warm necktie would be far better than closing up the jacket, it would spoil the whole shape," pleads poor Maria, who with a little more cunning would have said no more.

"Spoil it then; it's a mad shape."

"I can't do it, papa; I don't know how. I don't believe it can be done. Mamma, will you tell him it can't be done?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I don't like it myself. I don't see what is to be done to it, I'm sure."

"I'm sure it looks very nice." (Maria, injured and unbelieving.) "I meant it to be my best all winter, and now you're all against it. It's very hard."

"Here, let me see; perhaps I can make it better," replies her mother, pulling open the offending garment, and beginning to push and tug it about. "Give me a pin; I daresay it could be brought together."

"I don't want it brought together; I like it far better open. Do leave it alone, mamma."

"You won't have it open. You may either wear it close or not at all, Maria, so take your choice."

The doctor delivers his verdict, and stamps out of the room.

Maria has the tears in her eyes.

"It's too bad. Why did you begin about it, mamma? You might have known it would have set papa off. He always complains of everything I wear."

"I'm doing all I can for you; I wish you would stand still," replies Mrs Hunt, still uncomfortably tugging and pushing the jacket. "I don't know what's the matter with it, I'm sure. It won't look well any way."

"What *is* the matter with it, mamma? You keep saying it doesn't look well, and it doesn't look well, and you won't tell me where the fault is."

"It's just altogether, I think. It's too big for you, and too thick. Somehow you look all of a bunch."

Maria twists herself out of her mother's hands.

"I do *not* look all of a bunch, mamma; and I wish you wouldn't be so disagreeable. Why don't you go on at Clare about hers?"

"I'm sure I do; I'm always speaking to you both, but it's of no use. Neither of you ever care for anything I say. Where is Clare now?"

With the Tolletons, of course. Clare had gone down the street hanging anxiously on Lily Tolleton's arm, who, in her good-nature, had promised her a sight of Mr Smith. Maria confesses the fact, well aware of what will follow.

"Humph! What does she go with the Tolletons for? And where was Mr Smith?"

Mr Smith had been seen at the station, and the fortunate spectators had not been selfish, but had desired to extend the privilege to their less happy acquaintance.

Such was the substance of Maria's information; and Mrs Hunt humphs again as she hears it.

"What did they say of Mr Smith?"

"Oh, they were laughing so about him. They say he's a sort of old-young man—neither one thing nor the other—the funniest combination."

"I knew they would! Just like them! And now they'll be setting their caps at him as hard as ever they can!"

"At *him!* Goodness, mamma, they say he is as old as the hills! That was the fun of it."

"He's nothing of the sort, then; he's not so old as your father, who was fifty last March. He can't be far on in the forties yet; and you may take my word for it, Helen Tolleton knows that as well as I do."

"Helen was the very one who joked about him, and Miss Bain. She said he was the very husband for Miss Bain."

"I knew it!" exclaims Mrs Hunt, bitterly; "I said that was just what she would do. Get you and your sister to laugh at him and snub him, and then go and make up to him herself! Do you know those girls set their father on to call to-day?"

"They said he thought he ought to call."

"He think! he never thinks anything but what they bid him," retorts the unsparing tongue. "That is what they did, I can tell you; and his mother just laid in her grave."

"Mr Smith's mother!"

"And why not, pray? Why should Mr Smith not have a mother as well as other people? But it was the Tolletons I meant; and Mr Tolleton is many a year older than Mr Smith, I imagine. I suppose you think, because he dyes his whiskers, and wears a wig, and pinches in his feet, that he is quite a young man!"

"He's a very nice man, mamma. I didn't suppose he could be exactly young; though he always says nobody will believe that he can have three grown-up daughters. But I don't believe he wears a wig."

"It's the most barefaced wig I ever saw in my life. It doesn't even come properly down to the back of his neck. But any one of the Tolletons can take you in."

"There were such a number of boxes for Mr Smith at the station." Maria prudently changes the subject. "Do you know, mamma, he has a picture-gallery, and the Tolle-

tons say it would make the most splendid ball-room. They are going to get him to give a ball in it."

"The impudence of those girls!" exclaims Mrs Hunt, throwing back her cap-strings, and reddening with wrath. "*They* get him to give a ball! I'd like to hear them ask it. What business have they with him, or he with them, I should like to know? Common decency might have prevented them thinking of such a thing—just now, at all events, with their poor grandmother——"

"Oh, that was what they said, mamma. They said it must not be just yet, because of old Mrs Tolleton——"

"And what has old Mrs Tolleton to do with Mr Smith?"

"Why, you were saying this very moment, mamma, how could they get him to give a ball when old Mrs Tolleton——"

"Maria, you are the stupidest girl! What business have the Tolletons to ask Mr Smith about a ball, or about anything else? It's not one thing more than another! What have they to do with him at all? *That's* what I mean. Laying siege to him in this way; and actually taking possession of the man before they have ever met him!"

"They have met him; Helen met him yesterday."

Mrs Hunt, fairly gasping—"You don't say it; she never has, surely! Well, that beats all! I would hardly have believed that, even of Helen Tolleton!"

"What in the world do you mean, mamma? How could Helen help it? She was out riding past his gate, and dropped her whip just as he came out; so of course he picked it up for her, and they got to talk."

"Oh, of course." Very bitter is this rejoinder. "And of course she is in the habit of dropping her whip; and of course she laughed at him, and called him old and fat and ugly; and if she can manage to be Mrs Smith before the year is out, she will."

"Well, I've seen Mr Smith!" cries a fresh voice in the doorway. "He's not so bad after all, I can tell you. And fancy, mamma, the horses are to come next week; and there are going to be such a lot of greenhouses; and another avenue along the low valley; and a boathouse, and a fountain, or grotto, or something, by the river. Oh, and the out-door bell! that huge thing was the bell, Maria."

All this is mingled sweet and bitter to Mrs Hunt. It is delightful to see how much higher Mr Smith is held in Clare's estimation than in Maria's. Clare has not said one word in disparagement of Mr Smith, and is excited and interested about him. She has not repeated a single condemnatory clause of the Tolletons. She is alive to the greatness of the subject.

But then, what will become of all this most becoming eagerness, if it is permitted to grow cold and die out for want of putting fuel on the fire? What is the use of her caring at all about Mr Smith, if the Tolleton girls are caring likewise, and have got the start of her? The glories of the Hill had dazzled Clare, and so far well; but she almost wished that they had not been so obvious, that they might have had a chance of escaping the Tolletons' eyes.

The doctor was really too provoking in his pride and nonsense. Many a good thing he had lost, she was sure, from holding his head too high. She was always telling him so; but it did no good. And now she must wait, wait, while the Tolletons step into the healing pool before her very eyes.

Thus mortifying were her reflections.

Dr Hunt had argued the point with her many and many a time.

He had right on his side, and he argued strongly. With the Tolletons pushing might succeed; but it would not with him. Witness that affair of the Sauffrendens. Lord Sauffrenden never by any chance passed him by, but would stop to chat, and turn round and walk by his side in the most friendly manner possible; whereas he looked the other way if there were any Tolletons coming. Now, why is this? Dr Hunt knows full well. He never called at the Castle when the bride and bridegroom arrived from their wedding journey. He never received, in reply, an envelope containing frigid cards, delivered by a footman. He took care when he was sent for to Sauffrenden to go promptly, and retire swiftly.

And what is the consequence?

The Tolletons having talked of the Sauffrendens' coming, and of calling on the Sauffrendens, and of the Sauffrendens' society, and entertainments in prospect, could not so sud-

denly sink into absolute silence on the subject, without that silence having in it something ominous.

Everybody at once knew how it had been.

It had not perhaps been exactly forward in the Tolletons to make some advances; but they should have done it more cautiously. They had visited at the Castle in old times, whilst these three sprightly girls were still in the nursery; and the family had, somehow or other, been held in higher estimation than they were now. Perhaps they were justified in supposing the old relations were to be maintained. Who was to carry to their ears the description given to the charming, severe, autocratic young bride? How were they to know she would toss her little head on seeing their cards on her hall-table? Or how imagine she would be so particular and stupid about girls' ways?

The rebuff astonished and confounded them; and Dr Hunt, who had found out about it, thanked his stars it had not been given to him.

He struggled to put himself on a level with the Tolletons, and the Tolletons could not keep their own. They allowed him to obtain a footing on sufferance.

CHAPTER III.

A DRIVE IN THE DUSK.

MR TOLLETON had a simple and not uncommon method of estimating the merits of his fellow-men. He measured them precisely in accordance with the measure they took of him.

Astronomically speaking, as soon as a foreign body made its appearance upon the horizon of his firmament, he rushed at it, and if received with a corresponding degree of warmth, if permitted to rank himself among its satellites, his desires were satisfied, and he would placidly revolve around it in an orbit more or less extensive.

If, on the other hand, a repellent force threw him off, and he found himself fed with neither light nor heat, he would rebound with a violent explosion.

It is but due to him to state that he consciously exercised no repellent force in his own person. He was willing, nay, he was anxious, to be friends with everybody; and when with the utmost alacrity he prepared for a new friendship, if he were not met at least a quarter of the way, he felt reasonably astonished and aggrieved.

As soon as tidings had reached him of a new proprietor coming to the Hill, he had set his face steadily in that direction, waiting for the new appearance, and therefore it was hardly true in Mrs Hunt to affirm that he would never have called had it not been for his daughters. The very length of time during which he had been anticipating this visit, had served to inflate his mind with eager expectations; and it was these even more than Helen's hints which propelled him, with what might possibly appear a little unseemly haste, into the arms of the new-comer.

After all, however, he was not the first.

Captain Wellwood had been before him. Captain Wellwood had walked up to the Hill just half an hour before him; but neither he nor Mr Tolleton had found Mr Smith at home.

Captain Philip Montgomery Wellwood, who thought a good deal of himself, and was of opinion that he had been thought a good deal of in the Blues two or three years ago, was rather surprised at having to go and call on a Mr Smith.

It was not his own idea to do so. In fact he would never have thought of such a thing if it had not been for Lord Sauffrenden.

It had been one of the favours Lord Sauffrenden was perpetually asking. If he did you a good turn one day, he would as cheerfully ask you to do him one the next. He had no objection to be under an obligation; if anything, he liked it. Perhaps he realised the truth that the blessedness of giving may sometimes consist in the gift of that rare blessedness to another.

With Philip Wellwood, however, his own old comrade, his chosen companion still, his one familiar friend, it was not a system of give and take. What Sauffrenden willed Philip would do, what Philip willed Sauffrenden would anticipate.

The latter was now in town, and the request had been

conveyed in a letter to his wife—the same letter, in fact, which Mr Smith had picked up at the post-office door, and handed to her as she sat in the pony-carriage.

The letter was very much the same as those she usually received from her husband. Very badly written, very little in it; but as true, and frank, and hearty as the writer was himself.

It was a disappointing one nevertheless. She had hoped it would name the day of his return, and instead of this it intimated that he was to be yet longer absent. The business which took him to town was still undecided, he was awfully sorry, it was a dreadful bore, and he was dearest Milly's most loving S.

Then came a postscript. "If Mr Smith has come to his house yet, will you ask Philip to call. Ask him from me. The Lorrimers know Smith, and they say he is one of the best fellows in the world."

One of the best fellows in the world! If it had been Sauffrenden himself who said so—he knew many of that description—but the Lorrimers!

Sir George Lorrimer was as unlikely to pass such a verdict as her husband was likely to do so. He was a man whom it was difficult to please, and one whom she herself considered well worth pleasing. If it were true that he had bestowed such an eulogium, anything even that could be construed into such, when warned up by Sauffrenden and put into his own vocabulary, it said a great deal.

Had she owned the truth, she would hardly have supposed Sir George would have recognised the existence of such a nobody as the builder of the house on the Hill. A person of the name of Smith, and there was no more to be said about him.

It was no wonder, then, that Lady Sauffrenden was surprised.

She thought over Mr Smith, and could not think of anything against him. He was a quiet-looking man. He was unobjectionable. He was probably unobtrusive. In fact he was undistinguishable in any way. She would not have thought of him twice but for that postscript.

If Captain Wellwood were asked by her husband to call, of course it must mean that he himself intended to do the

same. And then Mr Smith must be asked to Sauffrenden.

And then she must know him.

Would it not be rather unfortunate? Was it not putting him a little out of his place? Could he be at home among their people?

Relief, however, was at hand. He was at home apparently with Sir George Lorrimer, and that was enough.

All this passed through Lady Sauffrenden's mind as she trotted her ponies home from the village, and fortunately she had gone some distance before she met Captain Wellwood. A more immediate meeting would not have allowed her to deliver her message with so good a grace as she now did.

If Philip felt any of the surprise, on hearing the message, which Lady Sauffrenden did on reading it, at least he showed none.

"I must go to-morrow, then," he said, "as I leave next day for Ireland. I shall walk over to-morrow, Lady Sauffrenden."

"Pray, don't trouble yourself, if you are going away so soon. Sauffrenden would never expect it. Any time will do."

"No trouble in the world, and I shall be away some weeks, so I had better go at once. I am going over in hopes of a little cocking—that is, woodcock-shooting."

"I know what cocking is, and I wish you good sport, but don't tease yourself about Mr Smith. He only arrived yesterday, so it cannot possibly matter."

Captain Wellwood was THE young man of the neighbourhood.

He had once been the hope of Helen Tolleton—her confident, comfortable hope. Then he changed into her anxiety. Finally into her despair.

When he left the army two years before, he was her hope. He was so handsome—which was hardly correct, as he was rather plain; so distinguished-looking—which was nearer the truth, on account of his height; so well born—a fact; so rich—a lie; that Helen declared she had lost her heart to him.

She had said this at least half-a-dozen times before the possibility occurred to her of Captain Wellwood not finding, or at all events not picking up, the lost possession.

It took some time to realise that such a thing might be.

He came to the house, played croquet, shot pheasants, talked, laughed, and admired, and then—stopped short just where he ought to have gone forward.

He did not indeed do those things which he ought not to have done, but he left undone those which he ought to have done.

It was inexplicable, and he became her anxiety. What could be the drawback? Every art was tried—and, alas! she knew them all—but unsuccessfully. And, then, somehow or other, whatever the cure was, ill-natured people would have said that it was the discovery that instead of being rich, he was rather poor; but with that we have nothing to do—be the cure what it might, it came, and was a perfect one.

Her anxiety died out, and he faded quite calmly into her despair. "He was a melancholy-minded man," she said, "who would never marry." And that settled the question.

Mr Smith had once or twice met Captain Wellwood, before finding his card on his hall-table. He had come down in the train with him from London, and they had afterward passed each other in a doorway, and had crossed and recrossed in the village. He knew very well who he was, and thought it very kind both in him and Mr Tolleton to come to the Hill so soon.

Mr Tolleton he did not know by sight, but as he placed the cards on the drawing-room card-tray, something in the name seemed to strike him.

A moment after his eye brightened—he had caught the clue.

"It must be her father. Now I know what puzzled my thick old head. A good thing I remembered, too. One can't be particular enough in these matters."

He had been called Brown once or twice in his life, and it had hurt him. He would not himself hurt the feelings of man, woman, or child, for the world.

Lord Sauffrenden's card was not long in following the others. He was at home before the end of the week, and the day after his return, found his way to the Hill.

The visit was a pleasant surprise. The Lorrimers had spoken to Mr Smith about the Sauffrendens, but he had

not supposed that they would speak to the Sauffrendens about him. There was no reason, he told himself, why Lord Sauffrenden should seek his acquaintance. He did not suppose he would trouble himself about it. It was really too kind to call the very day after his return from London.

For of course Mr Smith knew he had been in London, and knew exactly the time of his return. We all do know these things, unless we are purblinded by want of sympathy and self-absorption. He knew all about it, and felt a little justifiable pride as he carried the card to the tray—but he pushed it underneath the others.

Ah! if that card had not been fresh and new, but had been dirty and old, and deposited months before, there are many card-trays on which it would have found its way to the top, nevertheless; but not in that house.

It was with agreeable anticipations that Mr Smith prepared for returning his visitor's civility.

The walk in itself would be delightful that lovely autumn day, and he was preparing to walk when a thought occurred to him. Suppose he met Lord or Lady Sauffrenden in the grounds. Suppose they did not know who he was, and took him for an intruder. Suppose—— He rang the bell, and ordered the carriage; he could not face the idea of such probabilities. Lord Sauffrenden might walk to call upon him, but he, plain John Smith, had better drive to call on Lady Sauffrenden.

There was something in the little homely man's entrance which struck the lady of the house as she rose to receive him.

She had called him vulgar-looking in that momentary glance at the post-office door, and immediately after had cancelled the expression, and substituted odd. But he had not been sitting there many minutes before she discovered that there was nothing odd about him. He did everything that other people did, and did it singularly well. He was, strange to say, a gentleman.

Lord Sauffrenden looked more than once at his wife with an "I told you so" in his look. She had not been so ready as he thought she ought to have been in believing that Mr Smith was one of the best fellows in the world. The Lorrimers' authority had gone far, but in her heart she believed it had been stretched to its utmost limits. Sauffrenden

had declined to drive with her the day after he came home, because he wished to call on Mr Smith. It was really rather absurd. As if he could not have waited a day! And she had been cross, and gone back to her former opinion of Mr Smith; and if she had had a moment tc think, she might have put on her frigid air when he was announced at Sauffrenden.

But she had been obliged to meet him with politeness, and insensibly politeness slid into cordiality.

What a triumph for her husband! He would have made friends with every one, had he followed the dictates of his heart, and when a man came recommended by a friend! He must show him his kennels, his canoe, his photographic apparatus. He must show him the tree that was struck by lightning. Would he take a turn now? Then, to his surprise, his wife rose, saying she would get her hat, and accompany them.

It was not often she honoured a guest thus, for to tell the truth at once, Lady Sauffrenden had the reputation in the county of being a very haughty and disagreeable young madam.

But then Lady Sauffrenden did not consider herself blest in her county neighbours.

The few whom she liked lived far away, and those nearest to her she shuddered at the names of.

Was it altogether her fault, then, that it was only when alone with her husband, whom she loved supremely, or with the chosen few, whom she vaguely designated their "people," that the real Millicent shone out sparkling, warm, and free; and that it was no more possible for her to show herself at other times without the crust of formality and reserve, than for an oyster to tear off its shell of defence?

Her husband had no such shell, and was well beloved by all; but the few who were honoured with the friendship of the wife felt, perhaps, that it was the greater privilege.

He was hardly prepared to see her so soon bestowing that privilege upon Mr Smith. He was astonished beyond measure to hear her chattering gaily as they went along, to see her cutting a beautiful Cape jessamine for their guest's button-hole, and still more, asking from him the name of a sweet-smelling grass which her husband had seen flourishing at the Hill, and spoken to her about afterwards.

There were two plants of the grass, one on each side of the front door.

Mr Smith supplied the name, and then she wanted to know if it throve in the open air all the year round? It did, and if Lady Sauffrenden had a fancy for them, he had a number of young plants, and would be happy to send her a pair.

And there was Milly actually accepting them—a compliment indeed!

"There now!" exclaimed he, as the carriage drove off. "You see there's nothing vulgar about him."

"Vulgar!" repeated Lady Sauffrenden with animation. "He is one of the best-bred men I ever met in my life."

The day had grown rather chilly, and the carriage-rug felt warm and comfortable as Mr Smith bowled along in his carriage.

He too had been agreeably surprised with his visit. The Lorrimers, in speaking of Lady Sauffrenden, had called her stiff, and hinted that she needed to be known to be liked. They themselves thought none the less of her for this graceful buckram, which they were disposed to consider not an uncalled for balance to her husband's pliability.

But they did not desire that it should be shown to their friend, and thinking it not unlikely that such would be the case, they had endeavoured to prepare him. Lady Sauf frenden was stiff, but it was merely in her manner, and would wear off on acquaintance.

Lady Sauffrenden, however, had been the very reverse of stiff; she had been easy, gracious, and charming. He looked forward to her nearer acquaintance without feeling that there was anything about her which required wearing off.

Mr Smith had decided this point long before he reached the lodge gates, and as they clanged behind him, his thoughts took a different channel. For on the road in front he espied four young ladies walking. They were the Miss Tolletons, as by this time he knew, and an idea entered his mind.

The dusk was creeping on apace, and they were still two miles and rather more from their own gate. He would have his walk now, and send them on in the carriage. At

that hour, at this season of the year, it was too late for girls to be walking alone so far from their own grounds. In making the offer he felt no scruples—might they not have been his daughters?

Accordingly the carriage drew up beside the walking party; and its occupant, alighting, was warmly greeted by three of the girls, and introduced to the fourth, Maria Hunt.

The three dark beauties had the glow of health and exercise in their cheeks, and ready smiles on their lips for the proprietor of the Hill.

If he had guessed that these were the near neighbours at whose names Lady Sauffrenden shuddered!

"I am going to walk home," said he. "Can I induce anybody to make use of the empty carriage? There are seats for all, you see."

A simultaneous chorus of "Oh, thank you," and looks of indecision, responded.

Then Maria Hunt spoke. "Helen, you said you were tired when the carriage came in sight. As Mr Smith is so kind, should you——"

Helen did not look particularly grateful, and replied rather quickly — "Maria! I was only joking! Never imagining for a moment that it was *your* carriage, Mr Smith, I said I wished somebody would offer me a seat in it. Really it was no more than a jest. I can walk very well indeed. The others, perhaps, may be glad to accept your kind offer, but I shall walk."

"But why should you walk, my dear young lady? You would not like to be separated from them."

"I could not think of turning you out like that."

"It is not turning me out, I assure you. A walk will do me all the good in the world, for I have had no proper one to-day. Let me put you in," he urged.

"No, indeed." Helen was resolute.

"Or perhaps Mr Smith will join us in our walk," suggested Carry.

"And then Helen could drive," put in Maria Hunt again.

Helen again did not look grateful, but the next moment her brow cleared, and she answered gently—"I will drive, since Mr Smith is so very kind, but only on one condition,

that he does the same. Ah," she continued, turning to him with an arch smile, "you cannot say now you would *prefer* to walk, after a request like this."

No, of course he could not say so, but it was rather embarrassing, and he did not know exactly what to say instead. He looked at Helen, looked at the others, and wondered what was expected from him.

"Perhaps Mr Smith really does prefer it," said Carry.

"He dares not say so, if he does," said Helen, turning her eyes upon him full of laughter and defiance. "Yes, Mr Smith, I am tired, very tired, and have had quite enough walking for to-day; but I will not get into your carriage on any other condition. Say, will you come, or not?"

He looked at her, smiled, bowed his acquiescence, and she sprang into the carriage.

"Would not another sister——" but the other sisters had walked on.

"I think," said Helen, brightly, "that *they* really do prefer it."

She had gained her point, she meant to have Mr Smith's company, and she meant to have it alone. The means by which this end was attained she did not regard. It would be odd indeed if she could not do as she chose with a fusty old bachelor, and make him think it all right. Now, she had settled, he might as well begin to fall in love with her.

Her eyes sparkling with fun and triumph, she saw him take his seat opposite, and away they rolled, poor Maria looking rather wistfully after them as they passed.

"Just fancy!" was Miss Tolleton's greeting when her sisters arrived home, and ere they could rally her on her successful management. "He had been at the Castle!"

"At the Castle!"

"And he must have been there more than an hour, for I saw the carriage go by quite early."

"At the Castle!"

"Yes, indeed. I thought you would be surprised. Lord Sauffrenden had called on him last week, and he was returning the visit to-day."

"Did he tell you?"

"Not until I made him, and I had to be careful how I did it too. They must have been as good to him as pos-

sible, for they had taken him all over the grounds and gardens, and he seemed quite charmed."

"How very odd, isn't it?" said Lily, doubtfully. "After the way they behaved to us. What could have made them treat us so? I thought they would do the same to every one."

"Fortunately he never asked if we knew them," continued Helen; "I daresay he took it for granted. It is really very awkward sometimes, and very tiresome. I shouldn't care half so much about it, if it weren't for what people must think."

"Never mind—let them think what they please," said Lily, rallying. "They'll think a certain lady has a little touch of the 'green-eyed monster' about her, perhaps. Now about Mr Smith, the point is what he thinks?"

Helen laughed. "How can I tell what he thinks?"

"You can tell well enough, Nelly, when you like. Come, now,—did you make the desired impression?"

"I am not vain enough to be certain of it."

"I know you are, though. You think you did wonders, or you wouldn't be in such good-humour. Well, we shall see. There's plenty of time to work him up, as artists say. It all fitted in so well—even poor Maria's blundering speeches turned to good account. But I was afraid she was going to get in herself."

"Clare would, I believe, but Maria can always be managed. You have no idea what a nice carriage it is, Lily, so delightfully hung, we seemed to be going over velvet all the time."

"I should not have disliked the drive at all," said Lily. "My boots were too tight, and I was far more tired with the walk than you. It was rather hard on me to have to like walking best."

"All this time Carry looked sulky. It was all very well for Helen to appropriate the most sparkling young officers, and the most devout and dreamy curates; but of a commonplace old fogy like Mr Smith, she did think she ought to have had a fair chance. Old fogies might just as well take to her as Helen. She was not tired like Lily, and did not on that account care to have a seat in the barouche; but she would have liked a chance of making that barouche her own.

Her next speech betrayed a little of this feeling.

"I'm afraid Mr Smith must have seen that you wanted to go alone with him."

"So I did, and he was very welcome to see it."

"He wouldn't think it nice of you."

"Would he not? He ought, for it was very nice of me; most particularly nice, and kind, and complimentary. It would be very ungrateful in him to think anything else."

Helen was not to be put out of humour.

"Did you meet anybody?"

"Not a single creature. I was in hopes of meeting Mrs Hunt. I would have given anything to have seen her face."

"She'll think we're past hope now," said Lily.

"But seriously, however," said Helen, "we must take a little care with her. If she asks either of you about it, this was the way—I really was rather overdone, and would have been thankful to any one who offered to take me home. Maria won't be too communicative, will she?"

"I can hardly answer for her. You see it was rather unfortunate. But I impressed it on her how tired you really were, and how well she had done in persisting that you should drive. That was the point I pressed home most, and she was quite pleased, and proud of herself at last. The only thing I am afraid of is, that she did not quite see why no one else could have gone too. I think she would have liked to get in dearly."

"And what had you to say to that?"

"Only that Mr Smith had never suggested it. That he had offered us the empty carriage, but that when we insisted he should not turn out himself, he had not pressed more than one to accompany him."

"He did, however, just as you walked off."

"Ah, but Maria never heard that. She thinks he did not want us. What fun it will be if she goes and tells her mother that!"

Helen laughed again, her excited, successful laugh. The colour was in her pale cheeks now. "It really was great fun. Poor Maria! She looked so bewildered. And now, isn't it a pity that poor grandmamma should have died just at this time? We must have Mr Smith here somehow; who knows what may come of it?"

"I don't believe anything will come of it," said Carry

"Don't be cross, Carry; if I don't want him, you shall have the next chance. You would make a famous Mrs Smith."

"Not much of a compliment in the abstract, whatever it may be in this particular instance," said Lily. "But I want to be Mrs Smith too."

"No, you don't, Lily; you have plenty of time to wait. Carry shall have him before you, if she doesn't make herself disagreeable."

"I think he would suit Carry a great deal better than you."

"Perhaps he might, but I can't let her have him yet; I must be allowed to try my powers. He is a new sort of subject, and I'm tired of boys," says Miss Helen, saucily.

"Boys, yes; but there are degrees, gradations."

"All very well in their way, Lily, but the fact is, I have taken this into my head to do, and I mean to do it."

"You have been so idle lately, I believe this is the mischief found for your 'idle hands to do.' Go on, my friend—go on and prosper. All I want to know is, when you have obtained your victory, what will you do with it?"

"When I have obtained it, I will let you know, Lily."

"You would accept him?"

"You will see when the time comes."

More than this was not to be won from her. She nodded, and laughed, and looked brimful of audacity and mystery, but she would say no more. She was going to dress—it was quite time, the bell must have rung—and it was no use teasing her; and then she tossed off her hat, and putting her hand to her hot cheek, sat down, and forgot where she was going to.

Carry, who glanced every now and then at her sister, could not help wondering what Mr Smith had really thought of Helen. Of course he thought her handsome, but had he been struck by her? Had he merely approved, admired her, or had he been *penetrated?*

Helen had never looked better in her life. For one thing, she always did look remarkably well in her hat. It was a dark shady felt, very high crowned, with a sable plume falling over her hair at the back. It suited her; it formed just the proper contrast to the glowing face beneath.

But would Mr Smith be alive to this? She doubted it. She doubted his susceptibility, his impressibility. Old men don't care about such things. Ten to one he would not think of Helen, and twenty to one Helen would tire of him.

CHAPTER IV.

THRUST AND PARRY.

MR SMITH, however, had thought more than once about Helen. Carry made a mistake in what she said about old men.

When papa asks some of his dear old cronies to dinner, and they come in high neckcloths and out-of-date black coats, and you girls fancy it does not much matter what you put on—the limp muslin that hangs awry, or the good gown that never did fit well, but which it would be a shame to put away—don't for a moment imagine that they do not see it.

If you have an ugly and easy way of doing up your hair, keep it for another occasion. It will pass better with young Foodle, who may take it for the new style, than with these old gentlemen. He will bear with it, perhaps even approve of it, if he has only never seen it before; but they will wonder what in the world the child has done to herself.

No more observant spectator in the world than your silent, unimpressible-looking, innocent old gentleman.

Mr Smith, who was fifty, although Mrs Hunt denied it, could hardly be called old. He had attained his fiftieth year a few months before he came to Eastworld, and what he was capable of appreciating might therefore be still an open question.

Driving home with Helen, he had realised the fact that he was in company with a handsome woman. He had seen her delicate profile cut out against the dusky autumnal sky, and felt the fire of her laughing eyes playing upon him, with a certain sense of pleasure. He had noticed the contrast formed by the shady hat and plume, and had even

gone so far as to be impressed with a vague admiration of the slender wrist, and long white fingers, which the wily maiden took off her glove to display.

The fingers were industriously engaged in twisting something wrong into right about the hair; and being so busy, how should it ever occur to him that there was no special need of their services? Several thick gold rings, having turquoises set in them, showed off by their delicate blue the pure white skin, and he even noticed that. He thought he would never hold turquoises cheap again. On the whole, he had regarded his fair companion with a very reasonable amount of admiration.

Her tongue did not spoil her beauty. When she spoke, her voice was soft and pleasant, and she knew when to be silent.

The impression she left was favourable, and she was conscious of it.

But Mrs Hunt went up to call on the Tolletons next day.

"Mrs Hunt, wishing to know how Miss Helen is," announced Corker, generally known as the butler who drank, at Freelands.

He had come to the dining-room, where the sisters were sitting at luncheon.

"Who wishes, Corker?"

"Mrs Hunt. What am I to say, Miss?"

"Show her into the drawing-room. What is she come for now?" said Helen, as the man departed. "It is too bad to come at luncheon-time. Can it be anything about yesterday?"

"It must," said Lily; "Maria has done it. It is well Maria is not with her; I think we can manage her alone. Get a shawl, Nelly—you may as well be a little overdone, you know; and Carry, mind what you say."

Helen rushed up-stairs, and met them in the hall, the shawl over her shoulders.

All three then went into the drawing-room, for whatever might be their internal differences, they were united in presenting a common front in time of battle, and in Mrs Hunt's presence Carry was to be relied upon.

"I came to inquire after Helen, but the man seemed quite surprised at my doing so," began the doctor's wife, as

soon as she had shaken hands. "He made me repeat the question."

"Yes, I daresay, seeing her going about as usual," said Lily, looking affectionately at her sister. "You are all right to-day, aren't you, Nelly? But she was a little overdone yesterday, as perhaps Maria told you?"—to Mrs Hunt.

Mrs Hunt looked solemnly at Helen. "Maria told me she was ill."

"Oh no, not ill; not ill, or I should certainly have sent for the doctor," said Helen, sending her shaft with a sweet languid smile. "Really there was nothing to make a fuss about, thank you, Mrs Hunt. I am only sorry you should have taken the trouble to come all this way. It was very kind."

Mrs Hunt winced at the mention of the doctor. It suddenly occurred to her how angry her husband would have been, if he had known it could be supposed that she had come to see why he had not been summoned.

"Oh no, not the doctor. Yes, of course it's best not to make a fuss. I never do. I, in fact——" In fact, she did not know what she was saying. She had meant to find Helen in the full tide of health and spirits, and utterly discomfited by the notion of her reported illness—for although Maria had faithfully narrated the event in the light the sisters had shown it to her, and had neither exaggerated nor misinterpreted, so far as she knew, Mrs Hunt had made her own tale of it.

The fatigue was illness, that was her first improvement; and had she not taken the false step of making her inquiries at the door, instead of waiting to put them in the drawing-room, she might certainly have gained some advantage from it.

But that mistake put the enemy up to her move. Helen came in with her shawl, looking also white and colourless, since the morning had been wet, and she had been kept to the house. It had been easy to assume a languid air, and the tables were turned.

Then came the side blow at the doctor, still further to confuse his wife.

"Well, I'm glad to see you better. You look very well, at any rate," said she, making an effort to recover her-

self. "And the others, too, they had a longer walk still? It was a pity no more of you took advantage of the carriage."

"Oh, we didn't mind about ourselves—we liked it!" cried Lily. "We were only so sorry afterwards that we had not made Maria get in. You see, Maria would not own that she was tired till it was too late, because she was so good; she did not like to seem forward, when Mr Smith had not expressly asked her."

"I understood he did ask her."

"Oh no, he didn't. Not so that any of us could accept the offer, at least. He offered us the whole carriage, you know, most kindly, and wanted to jump out and walk the rest of the way himself. As if we could have allowed that! If he wanted to walk, why was he driving? So then, seeing Helen looked pale, he pressed her, and we made her go. It would have been foolish to make a fuss, you know."

This was Lily's version of the story.

Helen, with her cheek still resting on the long white fingers, in the proper attitude of one a little overdone, could not help glancing at her other sister.

But Carry was faithful. She did not confirm Lily's version; but neither by word nor look would she throw discredit on it. Helen drew a breath of relief.

"Well, really, you must have had a pleasant drive," said Mrs Hunt, turning again to her, with a little laugh.

"I was very thankful to get it," said she, mildly.

"And Mr Smith made himself very agreeable, no doubt."

"No doubt; but really I was not able to judge. Feeling disinclined to talk, his attentions rather bored me, to tell the truth."

"Dear! An old man like that! One would not have imagined his attentions could have been so very overwhelming."

Mrs Hunt gave another little laugh, not nice to hear.

"He was so very kind."

"Yes, indeed; it was so very kind of him to stop at all," chimed in Lily. "I am sure he had not even been coming our way, if he had not seen us. He said as much. He came on purpose to offer us the carriage. We had no idea

he was anywhere about, for we had seen him go by that way hours before."

"And had you seen him come back?" significantly.

"Oh dear, no, Mrs Hunt; we had never looked. We had forgotten all about him."

Lily, you see, did not mind making gratuitous statements. That they were false Mrs Hunt knew, and longed to tell her so, boldly; but she could only, restrained by the decencies of polite intercourse, express her disbelief in looks, and this naturally fretted her the more.

"Maria told me"—always poor Maria, the scapegoat—"that you had several disappointments from other carriages that seemed like his in the distance."

"Yes, Maria was disappointed. She thought it was never coming, and we told her probably it had passed long before. But she would not believe us. I can't think what she wants to see, I am sure, in the outside of the barouche."

"At any rate, that was all she did see of it."

For her life Mrs Hunt could not repress so much, though even as the words escaped her lips, she knew they were unwise.

She was fast losing ground. She was saying things she never meant to say. They seemed to be wrung out of her without her consent and against her will. She gave Lily a step at every turn, and Lily was not slow to take it.

"I am so sorry, Mrs Hunt; you seem to think we ought to have made Maria get in. I am sure I wish we had, it would have been so much pleasanter for Helen too. How could we be so stupid? I am sure I would gladly have gone myself," continued she, getting into the regions of truth at last; "for my boots were too tight, and I was tired besides; but really I did not see how to do it without appearing to intrude."

On the whole, Mrs Hunt gained nothing by her visit. She and Lily had had a passage of arms, and Lily had come off the victor.

The facts remained the same, and she had acquired additional certainty that the Tolletons were acting up to her prediction.

On this point she pronounced emphatically, as soon as she returned home.

Maria and Clare peevishly demurred. Whatever the Tolletons did, mamma was down upon them. The Tolletons never spoke against her, as she did against them. Why could she not let them alone? Mamma went and cross-questioned them, Maria and Clare, and then made up all sorts of things they had never said, and it was very hard, and the Tolletons would think it very unkind of them.

Mamma always fancied the Tolletons meant all sorts of things they had never even thought of; and Clare even went so far as to revolt, and declare she would never tell her mother anything again, if she went making mischief in that way.

Clare, however, had threatened this before now. She and Maria had long since learnt that it was their best policy to keep quiet about a number of things the Tolletons did.

They never saw the sinister meanings so plain to their mother's eye. They never spied out nasty motives and sneers, and things behind the scenes, as she did. In short, Mrs Hunt told them bluntly, that they could no more put two and two together than if they were blind bats and deaf adders.

They, in their turn, thought her bitterly unjust. They would fain have shielded their friends from her undeserved vituperations. They would have hidden them from her arrows.

This, however, was a vain hope. Do what they would, they could not keep the Tolletons out of their mouths. If they had an opinion to offer, it had been gained at Freelands. If there was a book to be read, a picture to be seen, a concert, a lecture, anything they wished to go to, she knew who had told them of it. It followed that she then scoffed at the Tolletons, and went to the lecture. The lecture, or whatever it was, was all very well, but those girls must be gadding about for ever. It wasn't one thing or another, but they were always finding out this and that, instead of staying at home, and minding their own business.

Up to the present time this general strain of condemnation had been all wherewith she blighted the Tolletons. She had had no specific complaint to make of them. Whatever they did she disapproved, of course; but far from carrying her disapprobation any farther, she was perhaps the only mother in the neighbourhood who permitted her

daughters unrestrained intercourse with the free and fast Miss Tolletons.

"Vulgar woman!" exclaimed Helen, passionately, as soon as their visitor had departed. "She got quite insolent at last. We shall have to put a stop to this. I wonder you had the patience to answer her, Lily; I am sure I couldn't."

"I think I answered her pretty well," said Lily, with modest confidence.

"Indeed you did. But it was as well, perhaps, that she had left Maria behind."

"I wouldn't be poor Maria when her mother goes home. She won't know what to make of it at all. But she really did want to see the barouche, and she will stand to that, I know."

"She would stand to anything she thought we wanted," said Helen, "so long as we could persuade her it was the truth. The worst of Maria is, you have to be so dreadfully particular with her. I am sure, to make her believe one story, I often have to tell such a number, that she ought to be held responsible for them all. But she is a good creature, and would do anything for us, if it is only pointed out to her, so that she can't mistake the way. After all, Lily, I am almost sorry we did not let her come with me yesterday. It would have saved appearances; and she is such a nonentity, you know, she would have been no more than a block of wood sitting by. The poor thing would have enjoyed it so much, I really wish we had let her."

"I had reasons for being determined," said Lily. "I wasn't only helping your little flirtation, Miss Helen. You won't tell me what you are up to, but I suspect there may be a serious end to this, and I approve," nodding significantly; "so now I mean to give my poor assistance, and you will see I am no mean ally either."

"But what were your most sapient reasons for excluding Maria?" said Helen, laughing.

"I'll tell you. It was not so much for her interference as this. You see the Hunts don't know Mr Smith yet. Now, if he had driven Maria home, of course Dr Hunt must have called at once. The only reason he has not done it yet, is because he thinks it best to hang back at first, being the doctor. He hates to be thought professional, you

know. But all the time he is dying for some excuse to take him to the Hill. I know, by the way he questioned us yesterday, and tried to find out who had been and who had not."

"How could he expect you to know?"

"I suppose he thought I could watch who went by; as if I cared to do that. Mrs Hunt would, I daresay; she is always at that bow-window of hers."

"But we can't see the road."

"Yes, we can, from our window, and he knows that well enough; for he stood looking out that day I was ill, and remarked about the Fulton's waggonette, don't you remember? That's not what I want to say, however. The thing is, to keep him as long as possible from knowing Mr Smith."

"And I can't imagine why. Do you think I'm afraid of the fair Maria's charms? What can it matter whether he knows him or not?"

"It matters because Dr Hunt never did like papa. You know how papa can't bear him; and he always takes these dislikes to people who are bad to him. He must have heard something of the sort, for he was quite ready to be friends at one time. So, if Dr Hunt goes to Mr Smith and laughs at papa, it would be a great pity, supposing, you know——" nodding again with emphasis. "Now, can't you see why it is best these two should be kept apart a little longer, if possible?"

In two things Lily was right. She was right in saying that Dr Hunt did not like her father, and also that he was very desirous of becoming acquainted with Mr Smith. He had ascertained that others, besides Mr Tolleton, had called at the Hill.

Mr Rodney, the curate, had returned from Wales, and had called immediately on his arrival. The Deanes had called. Captain Wellwood had called. More than all these, Lord Sauffrenden had called. He felt that the time had come when Dr Hunt might call.

The only drawback to his doing so now, was his wife. She never knew when to let well alone; and having seized on the definite project of her husband's going to the Hill, so chafed and worried him by her perpetual harping on the subject, that he had done as she desired, a whole day,

before he would give her the satisfaction of knowing it. Mrs Hunt said it was too bad of him, but she said it with a sparkling eye. Now, indeed, she felt that she had entered the lists.

Helen Tolleton was a formidable foe, and her heart had sunk within her bosom when she left Freelands after the passage of arms before narrated. But she thought, nay, she felt sure, that during the succeeding week, at the end of which the doctor had left his card, nothing more had passed between Mr Smith and their neighbours at Freelands.

The Tolletons had not asked Mr Smith to dinner, or if they had, he had not gone. For once in her life she inclined to the more charitable view, and believed they had not asked him. But it was hardly from charity, so much as from instinct, that she believed it. She felt uncomfortably certain that if he had been asked he would have gone. And she was right. He would have gone, with a great deal of pleasure.

But the Tolletons had not asked him although it was now nearly three weeks since their grandmother's death. They had consulted with each other, and felt that it was better not.

Not having been at home when Mr Tolleton called, Mr Smith, it is true, knew nothing of the recent loss in their family; but it had so happened that during his drive with Helen, he had made some remarks which made her feel sure he would be particular on a point like this. She had herself led to these remarks. She wished to find out what he thought.

All through the drive, even when she was most engaged in rendering herself engaging, she was carefully studying her companion. Would he only do for a passing hour, or was it worth while to think of the future? She was twenty-one, and tired of being Miss Tolleton. This man might suit her, and if so, everything else was all that she desired.

Now, how about her suiting him? For a short *tête-à-tête* her first appearance was sufficient. She was not vain of her looks—not one half as vain as many a one without a tithe of her beauty; but she had learnt, as she could hardly help learning, its value.

That Mr Smith should be struck at first sight—that he should be more than struck, stricken, in a sober, middle-aged, helpless sort of way—was what she expected; but she must look to her weapons if she meant to subdue him further. After her second interview, she knew that she had so far succeeded.

As they rolled along, sitting opposite to each other, she swiftly felt convinced of this. She knew that he was looking at her. She knew that when he turned his face to notice the sombre sky with its thin struggling sunset, he was furtively watching her face instead.

He was not young nor handsome, but he knew how to talk, and he knew how to look. He was not insensible, nay, he was creeping within her influence.

All this was delightful. She enjoyed it as a new sensation. She must have him. All that remained to be determined was, whether he should have her.

This was the under-current which gave a reality, a depth, to the drama. This was the doubt, the wonder, the exciting, alluring theme which absorbed her thoughts. She had not made up her mind, nor did she mean to make it up hurriedly, but she would wait and see.

Ten thousand a-year! That meant a great deal. London seasons, Continental tours, presentations, honours, and pleasures. That was what ten thousand a-year would give her, and she knew of nothing better that life could yield.

Then, on the other hand, a little plain elderly man, not insignificant, and by no means disagreeable. She thought it might do. If it came to anything. This was her feeling—a feeling between jest and earnest, which caused her to look back upon that dusky drive in the November twilight as to one of the most curiously pleasant things in her life.

CHAPTER V.

CAN'T YOU SAY *THE T'S?*

When Dr Hunt had left his card at the house on the Hill, he had relieved his mind of a great weight.

Now he could talk to Mr Smith when they met one another. Now he could overtake him coming out of church, and jump into the same railway-carriage. Now he could look forward with a very sure and happy confidence to many a snug bachelor dinner in that snug bachelor dining-room, for which, even with its extra surreptitious glass of port afterwards, he would have no opposition to face from his wife. She would be ready to forward all friendly intercourse of this kind, and he, in return, would make her welcome to get Mr Smith for a son-in-law, if she could.

He saw nothing degrading to her, his daughters, or himself, in such a proceeding. As long as his one foible was regarded, he was careless of the rest. As long as he was met on equal grounds, and was not called "doctor," he was satisfied.

It was an old offence of Lord Sauffrenden's, this calling him "doctor;" but he could pardon in Lord Sauffrenden what he could not in any other man. No one else did so. Whether Dr Hunt merely told anecdotes in which his friends called him "Hunt," or whether he more distinctly conveyed it to the minds of his auditors that so he liked to be called, matters not; his end was attained.

Mr Smith, who could not call him "Hunt" at this early period in their acquaintance, at least did not call him "doctor;" and when, in the course of conversation, he alluded to his companion as a neighbour, Dr Hunt's ambition was fully satisfied. To be regarded as a neighbour was the desire of his life. To be neighbourly included his entire creed. "And I hope you like the neighbourhood?" was invariably his third question.

To this Mr Smith had replied that, so far, he liked the neighbourhood very much indeed.

Less, indeed, it would have been difficult to say with politeness, but his manner expressed sincerity. The neigh-

bourhood, so far as he knew it, was peopled by Lord and Lady Sauffrenden, and the three Miss Tolletons, and he liked them all. He would have said, at all events, unhesitatingly, that he liked them all, but the truth was that he had barely exchanged half-a-dozen words with any but Helen. He had called at Freelands, of course, and they had sat demurely by while she talked, and had risen, and given them their hands politely afterwards. That was all he knew of them.

Mr Rodney he had only seen in church, the Deanes he had missed likewise, and Captain Wellwood was still away among the woodcocks.

One afternoon, however, shortly after this, he met Philip himself, just arrived by the train. Having been a little surprised at being obliged to call on Mr Smith, and having since forgotten all about him, Captain Wellwood was naturally again a little surprised at being greeted by a stranger in his native place. He remembered, however, almost instantly, who he was. They met in a lonely part of the road. The other passengers were far advanced in front, and there was a momentary awkwardness. Then Mr Smith raised his hat and stopped.

"I was sorry to be out when you kindly called on me, Captain Wellwood" (he had not forgotten that Captain Wellwood was the first of his new neighbours who had done so), "and to find you were from home afterwards. You have your gun-case—good sport, I hope?"

"Well, no; very bad. No frost, and no hope of it." Captain Wellwood was not in the best of humours.

"Ah, indeed; very warm here, too. Quite unseasonable."

"The hounds been doing well?"

"There was a fine run several days ago, but they didn't kill. I had the whole hunt up about my house for upwards of an hour, and then they went round by the river, and across the country beyond."

"Where did they lose him?"

"Beyond Mentonharst, but I am not certain where."

"You were not with them?"

"I'm sorry to say I don't hunt. I had not the chance when I was young, and I hardly fancy beginning now."

"Oh, better late than never. Lots of fellows don't take to it just at first. Lord Sauffrenden's home again?"

"Yes. Don't let me keep you standing here in the cold wind. You have not been walking as I have. Good morning. I hope we may have many other——"

"Good morning. Oh yes, certainly."

What in the world had made the Sauffrendens ask him to call? Not Sauffrenden, of course; he did not wonder at him. He would make friends with every odd-come-short within a hundred miles if he could, but his wife was different. He had a great opinion of Lady Sauffrenden, partly owing, perhaps, to the fact that she, like himself, was apt to pick and choose her acquaintances. Sauffrenden would have walked arm in arm with a street scavenger if he happened to take his fancy, and readily rubbed shoulders with far more trying people—those half-and-halfs whom it is regarded by many as particularly necessary to keep at a distance, if they themselves are to remain the immaculate things Nature has made them. Such an idea would have been scouted by Sauffrenden. What! a guinea become silver by rubbing against a shilling! Only silver-gilt rubs off.

Captain Wellwood could not be compared to silver-gilt. He was gold—true gold—but not the 22-carat gold of his friend. There was some alloy in him. He said to himself that it was all very well for Bob Sauffrenden, who was now a peer and a great man, to do as he chose in such matters, but for him it was different. He had no handle to his name to show who he was, and consequently every low fellow without eyes to see the difference, unless pointed out by Burke, thought he had a right to hang on to him in a way that could not be done to "a lord." Sauffrenden was a nuisance in that way, and, but for his wife, would have been twice as bad. Philip had often cause to bless her, and there was only one point on which they were at issue.

She would not know the Tolletons, and he would not give up knowing them.

Until lately the Tolletons had known everybody, and Captain Wellwood among the rest. Like other people, he talked of the girls as handsome and good fun, and like other people he stopped there.

Marry them? He thought not.

He liked to go to the house. Everything there was pleasant. Old Tolleton gave a capital dinner, and there was

a nice cover for pheasants, which some were ill-natured enough to say he kept on purpose for his daughters' lovers.

The young man had never declared himself a lover, and showed no intentions of doing anything of the kind; indeed it was alleged that had these been demanded of him, he would have declared they were not forthcoming; but still he was made welcome to the pheasant-shooting. He had not fulfilled Helen's hopes, but he remained perfectly good friends with her in her despair. Before the Sauffrendens, as the Sauffrendens, existed, he had gone to Freelands openly and often. Half admiring, half scoffing, it is true, but without a thought of hindrance.

The girls were very young—they were hardly grown up; there was but a year between each; and had they been like most others, it is probable the youngest would have been still in the school-room. But who was to keep her there? Not Helen; she found Carry dull company, and emancipated Lily the moment she desired it. Not their father; he got rid of the expense, and took their word for it their education was complete. Mother they had none. She had died when they were little more than infants. The only guidance they received of any sort came from their father's sister, who, worldly, ambitious, proud of her nieces' looks, and impatient for the success which should attend her chaperonage of them, hurried on their accomplishments, filled their minds with ideas of future triumphs, impressed on them rules and maxims such as might have originated from the lips of Lord Chesterfield, and then died at the very commencement of the season which should have seen Helen launched on her career.

The prospect was all changed. Now there was no opening left. Every year, it is true, they went to London, but each time the expedition was felt to be a failure. They preferred to run riot at home.

They chattered and flirted, and men encouraged and admired. They grew reckless, and came to be talked about. That was their history.

Nobody spoke to them, nobody reasoned with them, or counselled them, or tried to lead them into better ways; they only either whispered about them, or laughed at them.

They were bold, forward girls, and should never be inti-

mate at *their* house. They would come to no good. They would marry scapegraces.

But still people went to Freelands, and were glad of the Miss Tolletons to grace their balls. It was not till Lady Sauffrenden came, that the false smile changed into a frown. She refused their acquaintance, and immediately everybody who had it, felt ashamed. Some boldly threw them over at once; others gradually cooled. But the most continued to keep on a sort of contraband trade with the house, avoiding all public recognitions, and invariably looking round before they entered the avenue gates. If their names were mentioned, even though Lady Sauffrenden were not present, a guilty look invariably appeared on the faces of the company. If she were, they appeared suddenly stricken deaf and dumb.

Lord Sauffrenden confided the case to Captain Wellwood. "She says the girls are forward, and that sort of thing. Between ourselves, she was disgusted with Lily's behaviour at that ball when the manœuvres were going on. They are bad style, you know, and anyway she won't have them at Sauffrenden."

After that Philip had never enjoyed the pheasant-shooting without a sense of guilt. He did not mean to give it up, and felt utter contempt for such as had renounced their friends at the will of another; but he had a little, a very little, of the contraband sensation.

He went as often as before to Freelands, but hid the fact at Sauffrenden. It is hard if a man may not have his pheasant-shooting because the girls are bad style. He did not flirt. He had given them early notice that none of the three need expect to be asked to become Mrs Philip Wellwood; and the result was, that he was accustomed to have his day's sport, his good dinner, and musical evening, all very pleasantly—the parties understanding each other, and taking the agreement in good part. Helen, when Captain Wellwood became her despair, or in other words her platonic, cool admirer, found he was still worth a bouquet for his button-hole, and a flower in her own hair. The other two, finding him not so engrossed with the beauty as might have been expected, were pleased to share his general attentions. Mr Tolleton, who would not have dared to say "No," if his imperious young friend had demanded the hand of a daughter in marriage, being entirely submissive to these

daughters' sway, was nevertheless well pleased that there was no such poor prospect, either for his darling Helen, or for her sisters. He had no inclination to dispose of the comfortable eight or ten thousand he could leave to each of them, where there were only as many hundreds a-year to meet them half-way.

Any idea of demanding Captain Wellwood's intentions never entered his head.

Accordingly, the more certainly indifferent Philip became, the better he seemed to get on with each and all at Freelands, and the more he enjoyed going there. He was good friends, and nothing further.

All this was very pleasant, but it gave umbrage to Lord Sauffrenden

Lord Sauffrenden, in his sociable, whimsical, kindly-affectioned, perfectly proper and respectable way, yearned after the Tolletons. He could not bear to hear of other people going where he did not go. He hankered after their parties, carefully watched their movements, learnt what they did, and where they went. He had never spoken to one of the three in his life, but he knew which was which perfectly well, and, better than any one else did, what each one was. He knew that Carry was stupid, and that Lily was clever; that Lily drew like an artist, and that Helen sang only rather well.

He knew that Lily was the one who chiefly brought the family into disrepute, and that Helen could behave herself as well as anybody when she chose.

How he knew what he knew, it would have been difficult to guess. All he needed to know was—themselves; and that knowledge was unattainable.

It was Lady Sauffrenden, as we have said, who made it so; and it was the only point on which she and Philip differed. He wondered if Mr Smith were to be another. He saw nothing in Mr Smith but a little stout man turning grey, whose having come to the neighbourhood was rather an offence to him. If he were to be set up as anything else, it would be simply ridiculous.

"Nice fellow that Smith, isn't he?" began Lord Sauffrenden, soon after his friend appeared at the castle. "Milly told me you called—thanks. I think we shall find him an acquisition."

"I called, as Lady Sauffrenden asked me," with a touch of significance.

"Yes, well, I asked her. The fact is, the Lorrimers spoke to me to get him well introduced."

"Is he a friend of the Lorrimers?"

"Oh, by George! yes. The greatest friend they have. Stayed with them, travelled with them, lived with them, in fact, for years. They think there's nobody like him."

This, of course, had all to be sifted; but even after that process, there remained a good deal of extraordinary matter.

"Milly was delighted with him too," Lord Sauffrenden ran on. "Were you not, Milly? What was that you said about him? She hit him off exactly, Philip, but I forget what it was."

"So do I," said Milly, smiling. "It is too much to expect me both to say wonderful things, and to remember them afterwards."

"Well, I don't know. At any rate you liked him."

"I did like him, very much."

"The Lorrimers have put her up to it," reflected Philip.

"Seen the house, Phil?"

"When I went to call."

"Splendid rooms, I'm told."

"There ought to be. It's a large building. What will he do with it?"

"Do! Marry and settle. That's what he ought to do, at all events. I have been racking my brains to find a wife for him."

"My dear Sauffrenden!" exclaimed his wife, laughing. "Was that why you were going over all the daughters of the land the other day? I had no idea you had this in your head. Why, he is quite an elderly man."

"All the more reason why he should look sharp. Elderly? He's nothing of the sort. Nobody is elderly till he's sixty or seventy nowadays. Of course that was what I was thinking of, and if he does not help himself soon, I shall make bold to help him."

"He is not thinking of helping himself, I should say."

"That shows how little you know about it, Milly. You don't keep your ears open, as I do. I say, if he does not find a wife quickly, you and I must find one for him."

"And where am I to find one?"

"Ah, that's your business. He would be a good match for anybody. But wait a little; perhaps he will do without our assistance. Come along and take a turn, Philip."

So saying, and nodding sagaciously, Lord Sauffrenden closed the door.

"I'll tell you more about that, now we are by ourselves," said he, when they had taken down caps and sticks. "I have my own reasons for what I said just now. Wait a minute. Don't go that way; I want you to come and see the new dog. He's here, and I think promises well."

"Where have you kennelled him?"

"Next door to Gyp. Look now, what do you think of his head? First-rate, isn't it? Well marked, too. I think he'll do, eh?"

"If he does as well as he looks, I should say he would. It's the same you bespoke in September, isn't it?"

"Yes, from Bushe. But he only came on Thursday. Well done, old boy, well done! Knows me, you see. Yes, I think he'll do, on the whole. Then here are the pups."

The pups were duly seen and handled, and no more was said about Mr Smith.

They were at some distance from the house, and Philip, to whom the subject was indifferent, had forgotten it altogether, when his companion suddenly began—"But I was to tell you about Mr Smith. Oh, and first, have you seen the Tolletons since you came back?"

Yes, he had. The truth was, that he had met Mr Tolleton the day before, who, as a matter of course, invited him in to dinner. With the choice between good cheer and good company, and poor fare with none to share it, the temptation had been irresistible. He had gone to Freelands, not intending to mention it at Sauffrenden.

Gone, however, he had, and Lord Sauffrenden's face fell.

Why could *he* not go? Why should his friend go where he did not? Why should the Tolletons be considered a sort of forbidden fruit, of which Philip might eat and not be harmed, whereas it would be unwholesome for him?

He felt, like every one else from Eve downwards, that there was something inexpressibly alluring in the forbiddenness, and it did seem hard that others should partake of what he was debarred from, even if it had to be done under the rose.

This complaint, however, could not be uttered aloud.

Philip made his confession with the guilty air which inevitably accompanied it, and Sauffrenden did his best to receive it with a look of absolution.

"Ah, indeed! You have seen them? Then perhaps you know all about it already? Perhaps you can guess how they have been amusing themselves since you went away?"

"No, indeed; they did not tell me. Anything in particular?"

"Why, yes. It's too good a joke not to be something in particular. They have been setting their caps at Smith! That was what I meant in the drawing-room."

"Nonsense!"

"It's a fact. I can tell you all about it. But don't make mention up there, you know," pointing to the house. "There's no need for her to know anything about it. She likes Smith, and it might put her against him. I don't want that done."

Philip was laughing loudly.

"But listen—you haven't heard the half," proceeded the narrator, with the keenest relish. "I can tell you all that took place. He was up here one day, and drove. Well, he was on his way home, when he overtook the three walking, and the upshot was that Helen got into the carriage, and drove off alone with him!

"You don't say so!"

"I tell you it's a fact."

"But who told you?"

"The best person in the world, Dr Hunt. His girls were there too, or one of them was, and she went straight to her parents with the story. Of course one can't tell how much to believe, but the fact remains that she did it. That I can swear to, for Hislop met them."

"And what did he say?"

"I asked him if he had seen Mr Smith yet. I knew he had, you know, for I went down the road to meet him soon after Smith left, so he must have passed the carriage somewhere. He said 'Yes,' with a broad grin, and that he must be a kind-hearted gentleman, for he was giving a young lady a lift. However, he couldn't tell me which of them it was, or anything more, so I went off next day and

met the doctor, who spontaneously gave me the whole history. Helen was the one."

"I daresay she asked him."

"I daresay she did. But the doctor's tale was that they were all invited, but none of the others would accept. His girl, at any rate, declined."

"What a thumper!"

"Of course. Smith knows better than to ask her—a spotty-faced thing, like a ferret!"

"Well done, Helen!" ejaculated Philip. "Well done, fair Helen! brave Helen! I couldn't have believed it, even of Helen!"

"But mind you don't let it out to Milly."

"Who? I? What should I let it out for? However, if it comes to anything, she will hear of it fast enough."

"Yes, I suppose so. But then it may not come to anything, and there would be no harm done."

"Do you think it will?"

"How can I tell? You know them; I don't."

Philip winced. "You would know them too, Sauffrenden, if it were not for your wife."

"Of course I should, my dear fellow; I'm not saying anything as to that. Bachelors know lots of girls they couldn't if they had wives."

"But after all, you know, it is but fair to say they are not worse than numbers of others. They don't manage to keep it dark, as some do; but in reality they are not half as bad as they're made out. I must say I think it's rather a shame of some people——" Here he stopped suddenly, remembering that Lady Sauffrenden was one of the people he was referring to.

"Well, I think it is. But, you see, Milly's at the bottom of it," said her husband, frankly. "She's rather sharp on girls; and, of course, she would not like that about Smith."

Philip was silent. He did know, and he could not deny it: it chafed him. Sauffrenden, who would know people in spite of everybody, who had introduced him to many an acquaintance he would fain have avoided, had one elevation on which he took his stand superior—and that ground was the Tolletons.

He knew that Sauffrenden longed after the Tolletons.

He knew that all the time he plumed himself on abstaining from intercourse with them, it was because he felt this to be the only compensation for their loss. And when he had called on Mr Smith, on purpose to please his friend, he did feel it to be rather hard that it was through Mr Smith the naughty girls were now in fresh disgrace.

Therefore he was silent.

By the time they had come under the drawing-room windows again, however, he had thought of something to say.

"After all, you know, the Tolletons——"

"Take care," interrupted Sauffrenden quickly, and glancing up at the windows; "don't say the name so loud. Can't you say *the T's*, and then no one will know who it is?"

"What does it signify?"

"Why, you see," with a little of the guilty air himself, "she's always catching me at it. I don't know how it is, but as surely as I happen to say a word about them—the —*the T's*, you know—a bird in the air carries it all over the place. So, of course, she thinks I'm always at it. There now, you see." For at this moment out stepped Lady Sauffrenden from the conservatory—a bunch of flowers in one hand, and a pair of garden scissors in the other.

"Well, dear," said her husband, accosting her rather anxiously, "who are these for? Not me, I know; you never give me bouquets now."

"You get one nearly every day," retorted the little lady, good-humouredly. "And you don't deserve them for telling such stories. These are for the drawing-room." Then to Captain Wellwood—"Have you any engagement for Friday?"

No, he had none for any day.

"What's Friday, Milly?" Her husband arrested the invitation.

"Mr Smith is coming to dinner, and the Fultons, and one or two others. I hope Captain Wellwood will come too?"

"Will you come, Philip?"

"Certainly I will come; I always come when Lady Sauffrenden asks me."

"And bring Jumper?"

"Jumper will be very happy."

"I daresay Smith would drive you over if he knew."

"Oh, why should he?"

"Save the Buck. But, of course, four miles is nothing to him."

"I like the walk, if it's fine. I shan't take the Buck."

Lady Sauffrenden pressed her husband's arm, and no more was said.

"He did not like your suggestion of Mr Smith's driving him," said she, as soon as they were alone.

"Why should he dislike it? I would do it myself."

"Yes, you; but Philip is different." She always called him "Philip" when they were by themselves.

"How is he different? I don't see the difference. I thought it would be a convenience to him, as he has only one horse at present."

"That's it; if he had half our horses he wouldn't mind."

"My dear child, what nonsense you talk! If he had half our horses, why should he care to save them? If he had even his usual two, it wouldn't matter so much; but he is saving Buck up till after Christmas. I know that is why he won't go out with the hounds now. He'll have his other one then; but he doesn't want the old fellow knocked up. I knew he would be glad to save him; that was why I thought of Smith."

"You silly boy," began she, laughing; "that was just why he didn't like it. He didn't like the idea of saving himself at Mr Smith's expense. Poor men are a great deal more particular about such matters than rich ones. I quite agree with him."

"Oh, don't you teach me, Mill. I know fellows who would sponge on anybody for the sake of saving their pockets a shilling."

"It is not because they are poor, then, but because they are mean."

"They are poor too. Being poor makes them mean."

"No, no, it isn't so, Sauffrenden," cried she, warmly; "that isn't the reason at all. It has nothing to do with their being poor. Mean people will be mean, if they were as rich as Crœsus; but if they are not mean-minded, they will take more care about not appearing so when they

are poor, than they would if they were rich. I should, I am sure."

"Lady Sauffrenden's decision," said her husband, waving his hands gracefully, "will always be mine. The pattern husband, Robert Frederick, Baron Sauffrenden."

The lady coloured, and withdrew her hand.

"Now don't be cross, you stupid darling," cried he, catching her round the waist. "I'll kiss you before all the windows, if you don't behave yourself."

"Oh, Sauffrenden, do take care! How *can* you? You don't know who may be looking out. How can you go on so?"

"I didn't do it," said Sauffrenden, making a grimace at the windows; "but I will, unless she's good. Is she good now?"

"Perfectly good; good as gold. But just one thing, dear, do listen for a moment; I wish you would be a little more particular in what you say to Philip sometimes. I think you hurt him without knowing it."

"Hurt Philip!"

"You see he is terribly proud."

"Philip proud? *That* he is not, I'm sure. I never found him so. I should say there wasn't a bit of pride about him. He is as good a fellow as ever lived."

"That's the way a man judges. As if he would be proud with you! He's too fond of you."

"But he isn't proud to anybody. I see him with the grooms and people."

"As if he would show it to *them*, either!"

"Then who on earth is he to show it to?"

"He doesn't show it, as you say, to anybody, Sauffrenden, but he feels it. I should say he was the proudest man I had ever met."

"My dear child!" In his amazement he dropped her hand from his arm. "Why, Milly, he goes to the Tolletons'!"

"That says nothing."

"You know it says a great deal. Hardly anybody goes to them now, and you won't hear of having them here. I'm sure I should have no objection, poor things, but I always thought you made such a point of it."

"So I do," replied the lady, calmly. "I don't wish to

know the Miss Tolletons at all, and I don't fancy Philip would either, if——"

"If what!"

"If he did not admire Helen."

"There, Milly, now you *are* wrong. He no more admires Helen than I do. That shows how little you know about it. I could prove it to you, if I chose" (thinking of Mr Smith). "He only goes because he has nothing else to do with himself. He must have company of some sort, and he can't be always here. I should do the same in his place."

There was no doubt of this, and Sauffrenden might feel that he had defended his absent friend with both truth and spirit.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TEA-PARTY.

FROM the foregoing chapter it will be seen that Lady Sauffrenden was perhaps possessed of rather more insight into character than her husband. Captain Wellwood had not been exactly hurt, but he had been rather amazed by Sauffrenden's suggestion. Mr Smith seemed to be always coming in his way. He had not gone half a mile, before he saw him on the road in front.

"He is going to the Tolletons'!" was the instantaneous conviction. Thereupon Philip quickened his pace, and Mr Smith, being rather a steady than a swift walker, was soon overtaken.

It needed but a few preliminaries on the part of each gentleman to discover that Mr Smith was going to the Tolletons', upon which Captain Wellwood immediately found out that such was his own destination likewise. Having dined there the night before, he believed he ought to call. Mr Smith was all complaisance, and they walked forward briskly.

Mr Smith had made himself very nice to go to the Tolletons'. He wore a dark coat over light grey trousers, a half-

high grey hat, grey tie, and gloves, all good of their kind, and admirably suited to the wearer.

When his hat was on, nobody saw he was grey at the temples, and his ruddy cheeks and thick whiskers looked very well out of doors. His conversation was sensible, and his voice singularly soft and well modulated. In spite of himself, Philip was taken with his companion. There was an open unaffectedness, and a geniality of manner, which could not but please. He did not wish to like Mr Smith, he saw no reason why he should like him; but had he been asked, he could not, with truth, have replied that he did not.

The ladies were at home, as Captain Wellwood shrewdly supposed they would be.

There were fresh flowers in the drawing-room, and a blazing fire supplied the warmth which the autumnal sunshine, now beginning to wane, could not furnish.

Two of the sisters were busy. One had ensconced herself in the window, with her head bent over an illuminated page; the other was engaged in needlework. Helen, who had apparently just come indoors, stood by the table taking off her gloves.

They were much surprised to see Mr Smith, not expecting any one that dreary afternoon. It was such a raw dull day, and the roads were so unpleasant, and it was *so* kind in him to come. Captain Wellwood obtained a polite welcome, but all the enthusiasm, all the *empressement*, were for Mr Smith.

Mr Smith must take the easy chair, papa's chair, and have it wheeled round, and the glass screen between him and the fire. They must be very good to him, because it was *so* kind in him to come, and it would teach him to do the same again. Tea would be up directly, and they had sent to let papa know; he did not always care for tea, but would be sure to come when he heard who was there.

When the first bustle was over, nevertheless, it appeared to a spectator that the sisters were not working quite so much in harmony as usual. Carry, for instance, took up her position on the sofa close to Mr Smith's left hand, Helen having playfully settled down upon a footstool on his right; and took no notice of several hints thrown out for her dislodgment.

Helen was sure papa must have come in, and the servant

have missed him; he was probably in his own room. Carry, on the other hand, was equally sure that had he done so, they must have heard him put his stick into the stand in the hall; a thing he never failed to do with a great noise.

Next, Helen wanted the blind pulled down. The sun was in Mr Smith's eyes, and Carry was the only one who knew how to manage the blinds. Mr Smith protested that the sun was not in his eyes, and Carry let the blinds alone.

Then Miss Carry must needs show her embroidery-work to Mr Smith, albeit Helen was sure Mr Smith would not care for modern tapestry. He would not, however, himself acknowledge so much. He thought the workmanship ingenious and laborious, and gave great credit to the worker. Carry's spirits rose. With praise of the workmanship whatever he thought of the work, the worker ought to be satisfied. She returned to her misshapen monks with renewed zeal. But her end had come.

Lily was not going to sit by and see things going wrong in that way. She had appropriated Captain Wellwood herself, and retired to a distance with him, but she now saw it was high time to interfere. By her prompt aid to one sister, she soon routed the other. She wished to show her work likewise, and having boldly requested Carry to give up her place, seated herself on the arm of the sofa for half a minute, then made short work of the illumination, and returned to Captain Wellwood. It was all done easily, speedily, and well. Helen was left in full possession of the field.

Mr Smith appeared to be quite content with the arrangement. The rest were in the bow-window, he and she alone by the fire. Helen, now shading her face with her handkerchief, now letting the dancing firelight play upon it, now throwing out the merest suggestion of a well-shapen foot, now drawing her skirts hastily over it, put herself into a variety of pretty attitudes. Her hat grew too hot, and she tossed it off upon the rug. Then the necktie must come off too, and the brooch be fastened afresh, and the jacket undone, and a little business made about the whole, which showed off those pretty white fingers with the turquoise rings to perfection. All the time she was prattl-

ing to hir , looking up at him, wiling, if she could, his heart out of his bosom.

There was no doubt that Mr Smith enjoyed it all ; that he liked very well to sit in the easy-chair, looking at the firelight through the glass screen, and every now and then taking a peep down at the handsome head with its glossy coils of hair beside him. He would not have been human if he had not found a certain fascination in this state of things, and he was very human.

"Don't you find it sometimes rather dull when you aren't moving about?" said she once, when the conversation in the window was loud and lively.

"Yes, indeed; but one must get used to it; although I don't think one ever does get altogether used to it, Miss Tolleton. I feel more lonely now sometimes than when I first began to live by myself; it may be coming back to England—when one is abroad, people seem to live more in company."

"You have been a great deal abroad?"

"The best part of my life. I had no ties at home, and a great desire to see the world."

"It is sad to have no ties, isn't it?" said Helen, softly.

"Yes," meditating, "sad, but not so sad as some things. Friends I am very rich in ; they ought to make up to me for the want of kith and kin."

"Only they never do."

"You think not?"

"They would not to me at least."

"Ah, you are well off," glancing at the other group. "You have a happy home; you have nothing to wish for."

"You forget," said she, in the same soft tones, "I had once a mother."

He felt shocked at himself. The party seemed so complete—the sisters so independent, so self-reliant—that the idea of any blank had never occurred to him. The gap had so filled up that even the marks were invisible. He stammered an apology.

"It is a loss," Helen went on, "which is to be felt, perhaps, more than understood. We were so young that it is difficult to realise what it must have been to us, but I fancy we often feel the effect without knowing what it is."

This was true and genuine, but it was not simplicity

which put it into expression—it was rather a high degree of art. Mr Smith was touched, and regarded her with more interest than before.

"I, too," he began. Oh, how provoked Helen was with her father's joyous welcome at that moment!—that moment which might have been fraught with results! They had grown so confidential, so personal! Their voices were so low that nobody but he would ever have dreamed of interrupting. "I, too"—what was he going to say? Was he going to tell her anything? Was he going back to bygone days? going to uplift the veil which hung over his past life? to confide in her? to share with her some memory, some retrospect? Was there ever anything so tantalising? The only comfort was, she fancied that he was as much provoked as herself.

However, the thing was done. A dialogue broken off at this point could by no means be brought together again. A little graceful reluctance she might show, but rise she must, and ring the bell, and order in the tea.

Corker knew better than to bring tea without its being rung for. He had once or twice committed this tremendous blunder, at the time the autumn manœuvres were going on, and had stopped two declarations, and spoilt a farewell; at least it was in consequence of the belief that he had, that he had been admonished on the subject.

The girls always told their visitors that the tea was just coming up, but it never appeared till they rang for it. "Making it that wash," the indignant butler declared, that he wondered "they could swally it down their throats." He was not allowed, we must explain, to pour the boiling water into the pot till the summons came. Helen, in giving the order, had informed him that they did not like their tea to stand, but good care was taken nevertheless, that it did stand a very reasonable time in the drawing-room.

Afternoon-tea at Freelands was a great time. When the autumn manœuvres were going on it was usually held out of doors, and every day there were swarms in attendance. But after all, even with the addition of peaches and nectarines, the cosy meal was scarcely more pleasant out of doors than in the house. There were plenty of little shady nooks in the drawing-room, that did just as well as the

out-of-the-way seats in the shrubbery; and if there were peaches in the autumn, and strawberries and cream in the summer, there were muffins in the winter.

A few minutes after the bell rang, Corker might be heard in the passage. A clink and jingle might perhaps be heard likewise, giving rise to immediate and premature hopes. Then the door would fly open, and our friend appear, to the astonishment of novices, empty-handed. Stepping up to a corner in the wall, he would draw thence a curious combination of legs, which was instantly and under your very eyes transformed into a table—a low oblong table. From the same recess another bundle of legs sprang into another table. A third time the process was gone through, and the three, forming a triangle, stood waiting. A shining tea-service on a shining tray was then deposited on one; a mass of harlequin cups and saucers of the most delicate and suggestive colours on another; and cake, biscuits, bread and butter, and muffins, on the last.

For about ten minutes no one would take any notice, and the muffins would have been ruined had they not had their own private application of hot water beneath.

It depended then very much on who was of the company, which sister took charge of the tea-table.

On the afternoon in question Helen rose, and poured out a delicious cup, frothy with cream, for Mr Smith. She next supplied him with a hot brown muffin, crisp and tender, and guiltless of grease, and finally drew a stand to his elbow to place the cup and plate upon. He was not allowed to do anything himself—"it was against the law of the house."

Her father had next to be attended to. Mr Tolleton's taking tea was according as his daughters gave it him, or not. If there were many to be attended to, he went without. On the present occasion, however, he was to be honoured, and, second to none but the principal guest, obtained a cup which, if not quite so superabundantly frothy, was still excellent, and Helen quite the attentive daughter.

The next was for herself, but as she poured it out she called to Lily to know why she did not come and give Captain Wellwood his tea.

By this Lily knew the coast was clear, and Philip got his tea—but alas! there was no froth on his cream.

Helen helped herself to a corner of muffin, and carrying it off on the saucer of her cup, again took her seat on the footstool.

She had forgiven her father for his untimely interruption, and joined in the conversation graciously. After all, it was not probable that they would have been long undisturbed, as Captain Wellwood did not return to the window after getting his tea, but stood upon the rug. He was quite capable, if he had chosen to do so, of quitting the other sisters even without any special excuse, not standing on much ceremony either with Carry or Lily. Helen thought he very likely would have come up at any rate. Poor fellow! He did not like her neglecting him, it was evident. Therefore she threw the deserted one a smile, and a word or two, every now and then over her shoulder; so much, she felt, friendship required of her. The rest of herself she might devote to Mr Smith.

Papa's conversation began to flag, and she was afraid that Mr Smith would go. But Mr Smith feeling very happy where he was, and perceiving that nobody wished him to go, stayed.

Then Mr Tolleton came out brilliantly. His conversation had only declined because he was revolving in his mind the one subject on which he had entire liberty to act for himself, and that was inviting people to dinner. As a rule, his daughters liked having people to dinner, and, from long experience, he had grown so sharp about knowing what people they would especially like, that they now allowed him unrestrained powers of action. He knew they would like Mr Smith; and during the time he had appeared inattentive, he had been reckoning the weeks since his mother's death, to see if he could with decency invite him.

When the invitation was given, Helen's face told him he had come to a right conclusion.

But Mr Smith was very sorry, for Friday he was engaged. One person who knew as much before, expected to hear him say where. People do, you know. If they are only going to dine with Jones, there may be no occasion to mention it; but if they are engaged to the Castle, or the Park, or the Manor-House, it is more polite to say so.

Mr Smith, however, apparently thought otherwise.

The invitation was then renewed and altered. There

was to be no party, they could not have parties just then, being in mourning; he was at liberty to fix his own day; any day would suit, it was all the same to them, as there would be nobody there but himself, unless it were Captain Wellwood; if Captain Wellwood would kindly join them.

Here Helen's face did not show quite so plainly as before that he was on the right tack, but she saw it was inevitable. With Captain Wellwood standing by, and unable to pretend he was not listening, since there was no one for him to talk to, it was impossible to avoid including him in the invitation.

Would Saturday suit Mr Smith? Mr Smith would prefer Monday, if it really were quite the same to Mr Tolleton. He seldom dined out on Saturdays; he liked his servants to have that evening quiet. Monday would do just as well, and Monday was the day.

Captain Wellwood accepted his invitation likewise. Friday excepted, he had no engagements either.

All was thus happily arranged, and, as it appeared, just in time. Philip had barely made his bow, the "Very happy" was absolutely on his lips, when the door opened, and Corker, with an immovable countenance, announced Mrs Hunt and the Miss Hunts. He then proceeded instantly in search of empty cups; but the new arrivals being only ladies, and, as he contemptuously described them, "the doctor set," he contented himself with ostentatiously carrying out the muffin-dish, and not bringing it in again.

In Mrs Hunt's face there was a look of demoniacal glee. It was dreadful to find Mr Smith there, but it was delightful to catch him in the act. In the same moment that she noted Helen on the footstool, she thanked her stars that she had made Maria close up her jacket, and put on a clean necktie.

Helen rose from her low seat with neither hurry nor confusion in her air. Her lithe figure was made for these ascents and descents. Just touching the arm of the easy-chair with the tips of her fingers, she rose at once to her feet, erect and graceful, welcomed her visitors with cordiality, and named Captain Wellwood with politeness.

It was always said that this girl knew wonderfully well how to behave when she chose.

For Mrs Hunt she provided the same sort of chair from

which Mr Smith had risen, and prevailed on him to reseat himself. Placed the chair close beside his, made Maria take up the position from which Carry had been routed, and drew Clare into the proximity of Captain Wellwood. There was nothing any one of them could complain of.

Then Corker brought in the teapot afresh, and when Miss Tolleton saw no muffin-dish, she knew what he meant.

The tea was still good, and though there was no trace of froth on the cream, there was cream. Mrs Hunt could have enjoyed it and her rich cake very comfortably, if it had not been for one thing. Maria was so placed that all the light there was, fell through the window directly on her head. Now, unfortunately, Maria had that day been endeavouring, for some time unsuccessfully, and at length with only very partial success, to twist her hair into the new-fashioned coils which Helen Tolleton assured her were just coming into vogue.

Helen's own sleek hair was twisted round and round her head, and crept down the back of her neck in these coils—soft, glossy, black coils—and Mr Smith had admired them very much in the firelight.

But Maria's hair was neither black nor glossy, nor was it sufficiently abundant for any but a very experienced hand to have fashioned into coils at all. The consequence was, that in most places the frizettes beneath were altogether laid bare; and that where this was not the case, they were only covered by thin streaks of hair, few and far between, which hair being also of a light sandy hue, was very distinguishable from the framework.

Sitting where she did, this was not only perceivable to the mother's eye, but she saw that it was obtruded on the notice of Mr Smith. Mr Smith could not help seeing it; and, in fact, he was at that very moment contrasting it with the other head so lately beside his chair.

Mrs Hunt coughed, fidgeted, and thought what she could do to displace her daughter. The fire was too hot for her? But there was the glass screen. She was crumbling her cake? But the last morsel was being swallowed. Maria was as impenetrable as Carry had been immovable. Her mother saw there was nothing for it but to let her alone.

Maria was in great force. Perfectly unconscious of any-

thing objectionable, she drank her tea, simpered small observations to Mr Smith, and had in truth no eyes for any one in the room but Captain Wellwood.

What a magnificent man! What a lover, what a husband! She and Clare had seen him in church, and met him out of doors; and envied the Tolletons, who spoke to him and danced with him.

But the Tolletons knew that Captain Wellwood did not reciprocate their gently-hinted aspirations, and had therefore taken no notice of them. Now, the introduction had been unavoidable, and Maria was in a fever of delight.

She was rewarded now for her pains and trouble, and the aching arms her long business of the toilet had cost her; and was only a little jealous of Clare, who was taking her teacup out of Captain Wellwood's own hand. Captain Wellwood, when summoned, had unwillingly been obliged to convey one cup, but he had not gone back for another. He yawned, had looked rude and bored, and allowed Lily to give Maria hers.

But what did Maria see of that? Would he speak to her? Would he notice her? Did he, or did he not, admire Helen?

Helen had disposed of the last question before, with words to this effect: "My dear child, he is as poor as a church mouse. He never thinks of me, nor I of him." But Maria could not so easily dismiss it; it was too much to her now.

Meantime there was something in her mother's mind which she earnestly desired to accomplish, but yet had hardly courage for. There was nothing in the thing itself to take away her courage, but there was much in the fact that she wanted so very much to do it.

If Maria would only keep her head out of the light, and if the others would only talk a little more among themselves, she thought, however, she could screw up her courage. Then the light did fall away from Maria's head, and the others did begin to talk a little more generally, and Mrs Hunt summoned all her wits, and bolted out with—an invitation to dinner, and Friday was again the day.

At the very worst moment, just when the little speech was far enough advanced to admit of no withdrawal, the other tongues ceased, and the end of it was distinctly heard

by all. She knew it, and knew that her voice faltered as she named the day; but the thing was done, come what might, and if the invitation were accepted, she cared not who heard it given.

Mr Smith was again very sorry, but (as the others already knew) he was engaged beforehand.

Mrs Hunt's face fell, and her colour rose.

She had not the slightest doubt that his engagement was to the house he was now in. It was all as she had prophesied. It was already a gone case.

There was a general hush. Captain Wellwood expected that now Mr Smith would surely tell where he was going, and the Tolletons listened anxiously in case he did so.

The hush, however, remained unbroken, and in spite of himself Philip recognised a certain nobility in the trifling fact. If no one would tell, he would. He wanted to see what Mr Smith would say. "I shall meet you at Sauffrenden, I believe?" said he.

Then Mr Smith owned such to be the case; and what a commotion the intelligence wrought among all that planetary circle which had chosen him for their sun! It was as if a brilliant destructive comet had rushed into their midst.

No one had thought of Sauffrenden. Helen, although she knew that he had been there, had not thought of it. She wondered at herself, but she was pleased nevertheless. If—if anything *did* come of it, this would certainly rank as an advantage. However little the Sauffrendens might care to visit Mr Tolleton's daughter, they would be on terms with Mr Smith's wife. Mrs Hunt, too, was tolerably well pleased. Going to Sauffrenden was infinitely better than going to Freelands; and if Maria would only keep that frightful head turned the other way—she was gathering up her courage afresh, but the absolute silence among the other planets awed her.

Captain Wellwood, having dragged the subject, as it were, neck and heels into the conversation, suddenly left it to shift for itself. He had seen how Mr Smith received it, and that was all he wanted. Mr Smith had behaved like a gentleman. He was a jolly old boy, and he began to see why Lady Sauffrenden liked him.

But Mr Smith was not so well pleased with Philip. He did not see why the subject should have been brought in,

and was annoyed that one which he already had begun to suspect was not agreeable to his entertainers should have been forced upon them. He was therefore silent, like the rest.

Helen was the first to recover herself. "How is Lady Sauffrenden?" said she, turning to Philip with an air of concern for her health.

"She's all right. Has there been anything the matter with her?"

"Only she is not at all strong, and tries her strength far too much. But they have been living very quietly lately —no one has been there at all—so I hope she has been taking care of herself."

"No doubt, and got quite well again; for" (a little maliciously) "they expect lots of people next week."

Lots of people! Lots of dear, delightful, smart people! Rotund dowagers, made-up peers, harum-scarum second sons, and girls not a tenth part as good-looking as herself! Oh, how Helen would have delighted in Sauffrenden, if only Sauffrenden would have delighted in her.

Then she looked at Mr Smith. He was stout, it was true, and turning grey; but she felt she should not be ashamed of him. She felt he would not do the things her father did, nor say the things he said. She absolutely wondered whether *he* would be ashamed of *her*.

Helen was not the hoyden Lily was; nor so stupidly unconscious of her own defects as Carry. She felt dimly now and then that she and her sisters were wild and lawless, and was bitterly indignant if it crossed her mind that they were looked askance upon; but the temptation came, and, in the heyday of her youth and beauty, she stifled resolutions and forgot regrets.

One of these evanescent resolutions came into her mind now, as she looked at Mr Smith; but Mrs Hunt opened her lips, and it was gone.

Mrs Hunt had rallied her forces, and was bent on another venture. If Mr Smith was engaged on Friday, would he make it Monday? on Monday they were going to have a few friends likewise.

Alas! her grasp wanted the breadth of the Tolletons. It was quite as tenacious, as unyielding; but it was timid, as was natural, seeing that there were no coadjutors, and a

great forest of enemies' eyes and ears in ambush on every side If she could have allowed Mr Smith to name his own day, as the Tolletons did—with none hearing the flattering words but Philip Wellwood, who was in a manner bound over to keep the peace, Mr Smith would have done so, and her point would have been gained.

But she was afraid. She wished it to appear that he had only been asked, on the spur of the moment, to make a twelfth at one of Dr Hunt's little dinner-parties; and, foiled in Friday, took refuge in Monday.

Monday would really have suited her arrangements better, as she did intend to have some other guests; and two additional days in which to collect them would have been just as well.

But when Mr Smith was again obliged to decline, Mrs Hunt *knew* what compelled him.

She rose to go, almost immediately.

Mr Smith rose too, and glanced at his companion. Philip's glance in return was significant. He was not going, and he did not mean to stay behind alone. A slight imperious gesture detained the other gentleman. As the door shut he spoke.

"If you can wait a few minutes, sir, I will show you the short cut through the plantation; it leads into your own."

"Oh, certainly!" Mr Tolleton was obsequiously endorsing the suggestion, the plantation being his own; but Captain Wellwood proceeded, without having the grace to stop—

"Just wait till that good woman and her daughters are safe out of sight."

Accordingly, they remained another five minutes, and then took their leave.

Before parting in the short cut, Mr Smith had asked Captain Wellwood to favour him with his company on his lonely drive to Sauffrenden, and Philip had been graciously pleased to accept the invitation.

"If she marries him, it will be the best day's work she ever did in her life," concluded he; "but it is rather too good a joke, the way she makes love to him."

CHAPTER VII.

MARIA'S DAY.

Good as the joke was, Mrs Hunt did not see it. Poor Maria had a sad walk home. With her head full of Captain Wellwood, of his necktie, his ring, and his bow—the said head was cruelly used by her mother. She wondered Maria could go out such a figure. She had told her and Clare both, a dozen of times, to come to *her* glass, if that in their room wasn't hung so that they could see properly. Clare might have seen that her sister was decent when she went to make calls; but it was always the way—she was always to be made ashamed of them some way or other. For her part, she wondered what Mr Smith could have thought of it.

Maria cared not a jot what Mr Smith thought of it; all her anxiety was to know what Captain Wellwood thought of it. She appealed to Clare for a statement of the truth; and Clare owned she could not think where all the hair had slipped away to.

Still Maria obtained some comfort from the reflection that, considering where she sat, at least he could not have seen the whole; and Clare further soothed her with the assurance that one side was a very great deal better than the other.

"It was the worst side that was next Mr Smith," pursued her mother; "right under his very nose. And as if you must needs make it even more observable, you kept turning and twisting your head the other way, as if on purpose to show it to him, whether he would or no. I daresay he thought it was all false together—what there was of it, at any rate; for it seemed to me nothing but a mass of frizettes."

"Oh, mamma, don't say any more about it," interposed Clare, good-naturedly. "It was not so bad as all that, Maria. And it was a good thing the worst side was next Mr Smith, and not Captain Wellwood."

"Captain Wellwood! And pray, what did it matter to Captain Wellwood? What is Captain Wellwood to us?"

cried her mother. "A man who has always been as rude and nasty to your father and me as he could be. A man I have a perfect dislike to, and never wanted to make acquaintance with at all. Oh, he was too fine a gentleman even to shake hands with me to-day, but must needs bow, as if he had been a royal duke, when I passed by. If it hadn't been for him and his airs, I am sure Mr Smith would have walked home with us to-day. I could see he was looking for his hat and gloves when I rose, and then my gentleman went up and spoke to him, and got him to stay, because he wanted to have his flirt out with Helen."

Maria and Clare protested with equal vehemence against this rendering of the scene.

It was far more likely to have been Mr Smith who kept Captain Wellwood. They were convinced Mr Smith wished to stay. Captain Wellwood had shown far stronger symptoms of going than ever Mr Smith had, for he went to the door and opened it. If he did speak to the other, it was to ask him to go too.

In fact, it suited them that Mr Smith should be the culprit, and it suited their mother that it should be Captain Wellwood.

Now that Maria and Clare had seen their hero face to face, had spoken to him, bowed to him, taken their tea (at least Clare had) from his own fingers, they felt by no means so certain that he must admire Helen. Clare thought he did not take any special notice of Helen, and Maria affirmed he was quite as attentive to Clare herself. She, in return, disclaimed with delight, and assured her sister, as a reward, that nobody but that old fright Mr Smith could have seen the unfortunate hair; and who cared what he thought?

This was for their own room; a different state of things prevailed in the parlour.

There Mrs Hunt was giving a detailed account of her visit to her husband, who, luckily for her, was not one to be either uninterested or unsympathetic. In fact, the doctor was as great a manœuvrer as his wife; and when his dignity was not compromised—and it was a small and easily satisfied dignity—could listen to her with a very good will.

Maria's hair received its due meed of censure, and she knew that such had been the case the moment she entered

the room. She knew it by the glance of her father's eye towards her head as she entered, and the evident check received there, for she had lost no time, after returning home, in disburdening herself of the obnoxious mass.

"Well, I'm glad to see you have made yourself more respectable," said her mother; "and I do hope it will be a warning to you, Maria. For I will say that of the Tolleton girls, whatever be their faults—and I'm sure I'd be puzzled to name another good thing about them—they always contrive to have their hairs nice. Go when you will, early or late, you never catch them with great frizettes sticking out, and hair-pins showing in every direction. What they use I can't say, but Helen's head was like satin this afternoon."

"They don't use anything," said Maria, unable from habit to resist defending her friends, though at the moment she did feel rather sore on the subject of Helen's satin head. "It's just the same when they brush it out, and it is no great merit their keeping it nice, they have such quantities."

"Well, I'm sure it isn't often you hear me say a good word for them," truly rejoined Mrs Hunt; "but I do like to see tidy hair, and that's what I never do see in my own house. I never ask you to go out but there's such a fuss to get the hair done; and nothing to show for it, when it is. Clare's not quite so bad as you, but I have to speak to her too, most days."

"Oh, well, mamma," put in the doctor, who thought enough had been said, "she'll not do it again. After all, it's no such great crime. My girls stick to what is their own, and don't put on the filthy concoctions of other people—and that's one thing, at all events. Well, Clare," as Clare entered the room, "and what did you think of Mr Smith? Here's your mother quite in love with him."

"I thought him very nice, papa, and he had got such a lovely flower in his button-hole, and——"

"Oh, Clare!" burst in Maria, "*did* you see Captain——"

"Tut! tut!" exclaimed her father, impatiently; "what does that matter? Let Clare say what she was going to say. Go on, Clare."

"You shouldn't interrupt people," added her mother.

"It was his gloves, papa," said Clare. "They were lying on the table close to me, and they were the *sweetest* colour. And then I looked to see what else he had on,

and his tie matched exactly, and he was dressed altogether splendidly,—far better than Captain Wellwood."

Cunning Clare! Both father and mother smiled approbation.

"If Clare, now, had been on the sofa beside Mr Smith, she would have found something to make him talk about, I daresay. Maria only said such stupid things that nobody could care for, and then kept turning and twisting her head the other way, showing him the whole back, and seeming as if she were listening to the nonsense that Wellwood was talking to Lily all the time. I'm sure I couldn't hear anything very entertaining going on, and it was very rude to Mr Smith. I daresay he didn't think you at all nice or agreeable."

Maria slowly crimsoned during this speech. She had been listening to Lily and Captain Wellwood, she had been trying in a small futile way to attract his attention. Mr Smith she had regarded simply as a barricade.

Clare, who had been the fortunate one throughout, now came to her sister's rescue. She had had a delightful visit. Placed beside her hero, several times addressed by him, handed her tea-cup, favoured with a special bow at departure. Then afterwards no reproaches nor innuendos, but smiles and commendations from both parents.

She was very sorry for poor Maria, who was always in hot water, which she had neither the wisdom to avoid falling into, nor the tact necessary to extricate herself from.

"Well, mamma," said her defender, "I don't think Mr Smith could have minded, for he shook hands with us both so kindly, and said he hoped we would make use of his short cut whenever we liked — and it was to Maria he said it."

This altered the case. Hopes were again entertained for Maria. Her father's brow cleared, and her mother's tongue softened. Ten thousand a-year had made a great impression on Dr Hunt, since the day on which he had called Mr Smith stout and apoplectic. At that time he had barely received the first shadow of a conception of him as a son-in-law; but since then the idea had matured, and he was as anxious as his wife could be to think and speak of him, if not exactly as the young marrying man, at least as a man who meant to marry, and was not too old for it.

"Well, well," said he, good-humouredly, "that was very kind and neighbourly, I'm sure. The short cut will be very convenient to me sometimes, I can tell you—that is, if Maria gives me permission to use it."

"I, papa!"

"Yes, you. Clare says you were the favoured person. Perhaps when he gave you leave, however, he did not mean to include your whole family. You may take Clare, however, I suppose. I think, mamma, she must really take Clare, or we shall have it all over the village, if Maria is seen walking about the Hill by herself."

"I didn't hear him say it, Maria," said Mrs Hunt, wistfully.

"No, no, mamma," continued the Doctor, looking very jocose; "you didn't hear, I daresay. Mr Smith knew better than that, Maria, did he not? Those are not the sort of things mammas are allowed to hear, are they?"

"I'll tell you when it was, mamma," said Clare. "It was when you dropped your glove, and we were all looking for it."

"And it was under Captain Wellwood's dirty boot all the time."

"Mr Smith was shaking hands with Maria, and Lily said something about its being a longer walk between them and us now, that we had all the way round by the high-road to go; and Maria said Yes, and something about the short cut; and Mr Smith looked at her, and said at once if it was his short cut she meant, he hoped she would make use of it—would not scruple to make use of it, those were the words—whenever she liked."

"And were the Tolletons to do the same?" inquired her mother, anxiously.

"Nothing was said about the Tolletons, but I daresay they took it so," Clare owned. "For Lily thanked him as well as Maria. I think they took it as leave for all."

In saying this Clare sacrificed her friends. But then it lay between her friend and her sister. And moreover, it was true, and it was necessary to be told; and after all, the Tolletons were in such dire disgrace about Mr Smith as it was, that even this could hardly plunge them deeper.

Maria had been skilfully piloted out of her troubles by

a way she would never have discovered for herself, and Clare felt she had acted rightly.

Mrs Hunt, as it proved, was too well pleased to be very angry even with the Tolletons. She wondered, indeed, that any girls could demean themselves so. She was sure none but those ever would. But then she was so certain that such impudent forwardness must have disgusted Mr Smith, and so satisfied that the compliment had not extended one inch beyond her daughter, that there was more exultation than anger in her heart.

Maria was now formally consecrated to Mr Smith.

If she went out walking, she was asked if she had been in the short cut. If she met Mr Smith in the village, her father pretended to think it was by appointment. She could not mention his name without blushing, nor hear it without alarm. It was dreadful. What was Mr Smith to her, or she to him? She confided to Clare, with tears in her eyes, her opinion that he was an old horror; and why should she be teased out of her life by having him tacked on to her? It was very cruel.

Clare's worldly wisdom was to this effect. Mr Smith might, or might not, be thinking of Maria; he did her no harm. And since their father and mother had taken this idea into their heads, she and Maria had obtained a great deal more liberty than they used to have—added to which, they most certainly would never have received those lovely new hats from papa if it had not been for Mr Smith.

"Well, but is it right, that sort of thing?" said Maria, conscientiously.

"How can it be wrong? You had nothing to do with it; it is their own idea. And all you have to do is just to keep quiet, and not put on that face whenever his name is mentioned."

"I can't help it."

"You must help it, that's all. What does it signify? The whole thing will die out of itself, and then nobody can find fault with you."

Clare's expectations were not, it will be thus seen, very strong.

"Don't you see?" she went on. "Mr Smith never bothers you, nor makes a fuss. Though papa chooses to think he does, that doesn't make him. And papa does

exaggerate so; he is getting as bad as mamma. I shouldn't wonder if Mr Smith had never once thought about you at all; it was all a chance his happening to say to you that about the short cut, and that is what they go upon most. And then, what does it matter, papa's laughing? He never does it before people."

"He did it before Lily the other day, and I got so hot; I know she must have seen it. What do you think he said? He asked her if it wasn't rather a strange thing that I never went to the post-office in the afternoons now, without happening to meet Mr Smith. Now you know," continued the astute Maria, "there is nothing so very odd about it. Papa will send me every day, and he knows that Mr Smith always calls for his afternoon letters himself."

"Oh, well, Maria, Lily would never think anything of that. It would never enter their heads that papa was not only in joke. As if they would ever think of Mr Smith! If you take no notice, it will all blow over."

All this was very sensible, no doubt. But still it dawned upon Maria that whereas it was she who had all the disagreeable part of the business to bear, Clare reaped the benefits in an equal degree. It was therefore, to say the least of it, easy for Clare to talk.

They both enjoyed the increased liberty she had alluded to, and their new hats were precisely alike. When they availed themselves of the short cut, it was quite as much to please Clare as Maria. Yet Maria alone had to endure the odious joking afterwards.

Clare pointed out that they could not do without the short cut. It was by taking it that they ran their surest chance of meeting Captain Wellwood; indeed they had absolutely met him in it once. Maria was quite as eager as she to meet him, and the day that they had done so, and had had on their new hats likewise, she had forgiven Mr Smith everything.

Captain Wellwood had barely stopped a minute, had remarked it was a nice day for a walk, supposed they were going to see the Miss Tolletons, and moved on. On this meeting, however, they built fresh hopes from day to day. With burning cheeks and bated breath, they told of it at Freelands, and wondered at the coolness with which it was received. At home, it had merely raised a speculation as

to whether Captain Wellwood had received permission to be there; and it had been added that he had the face to go, whether he had had leave granted him or not.

But this did not lessen the thing at all. By themselves Maria and Clare talked and talked, and talked themselves into the most foolish of vain imaginings, and then put on the captivating hats again, and sallied forth in hopes of another meeting. They traversed the short cut daily.

Once they saw his hat. They were sure it was his hat—a grey hat, a quickly bobbing hat, a hat that was vanishing before their eyes.

"Don't run, but walk as fast as ever you can, Maria, and we'll come up with him at the bridge," whispered Clare, panting. "I know a way down by this bank, here, you see; the leaves have half hidden it, but I know it comes out at the bridge. Take care! What a noise you make! I wish you would not go falling about that way."

"Oh, look, Clare! look what I've done! Such a smear! What shall I do?" in loud whispers. "Perhaps we had better not go on?"

"Oh, nonsense! Hide behind me, and no one can see. Why, what does it matter? it's nothing," said Clare, whose own dress was not smeared. "Now be quiet, and walk slowly, and don't breathe in that way. He can't have come all this round yet. There he is!"

But, oh the disappointment, the vexation! It was there all right, the hat, but it belonged not to Captain Wellwood, but to Mr Smith.

Maria, in her sudden revulsion of feeling, would have turned back, but Clare stopped her. "You can't now; he has seen us. It's too late; we must just come on. Do keep quiet, and be civil; there's nothing to mind. Papa will be delighted, at all events."

Papa was. He made Clare repeat all about the meeting a dozen times over; and when she came to the part where Mr Smith had accompanied them as far as the stile, and bade them gather his snowdrops and primroses as soon as ever they began to lift their heads above ground, he looked at Maria, chuckled, laughed aloud, and winked repeatedly, till she was as red as a peony.

Mrs Hunt, in high good-humour, told Maria not to mind. Papa would have his joke, and the girls needn't

mind him. For her part, she should always be glad to meet Mr Smith, and have a friendly chat, whether it come to anything or not. A nice, pleasant man like that, it was really too bad of papa to go and make them shy with him by saying such things. If he did think of Maria, he had never said anything; and if she were her, she would take no heed of papa's nonsense, but just be as friendly and easy with Mr Smith as she liked.

Maria was in high favour at this time. There were no more dissatisfied looks, and comparisons drawn between her and Clare, to the advantage of neither, but to the greater disadvantage of Maria. The sisters went to Freelands as often as they liked—far oftener, indeed, than they were wanted there; and the Tolletons escaped with wonderfully little animadversion.

It was Clare's doing, and she had to keep a brisk look-out on Maria all the time, lest in one unguarded moment she should spoil all. She had to keep Maria silent during her father's sallies, by admonitions of eyes, hands, or feet under the table; and all the fuel which kept the flame alive within her parent's bosom was supplied by her. Clare, for a fool, had her full share of fool's cunning.

Of course, the Tolletons knew what was going on, and a fine piece of fun it was to them.

They could make their own out of it, too. By encouraging the idea, insinuating gentle suspicions, and boldly fabricating rumours, they went far to make poor Maria believe there was truth after all in it.

Then they delicately hinted the same to Mrs Hunt. Mrs Hunt must not believe it was their thought; such a thought had never crossed their minds, but they had heard something of the kind from other quarters. No, they must not name names. *One* of the Miss Hunts; that was what was said. They were not going to ask which, and they would promise Mrs Hunt not to circulate the report further, if she would just say—was it Maria?

Mrs Hunt almost liked the girls that afternoon. She was not going to answer any such questions. For her part, she did not know what they could be thinking of. She had never noticed anything—at least, hardly anything—nothing of the least consequence; and she begged they wouldn't put such nonsense into her girls' heads. Well,

if it was either of them, it was Maria; but she was quite uncertain of anything—was really barely sensible of any attentions.

And then she felt almost affectionate to Helen Tolleton.

By that time Mr Smith had dined at the Hunts', and talked a good deal to Maria, as it was natural he should, when she had been placed beside him on purpose. The doctor's drawing-room had none of those little nooks and corners that were the charm at Freelands; any talking between a lady and gentleman had to be done boldly, under the eyes of all the company assembled.

Maria, however, had acquitted herself well, and her mother's heart beat with pleasure when, on the appearance of the gentlemen up-stairs, she saw Mr Smith draw near to the tea-table at which her eldest daughter presided. Maria herself had more mingled sensations. She felt her dignity, but she felt it a painful one. It flurried her nerves. By instinct she provided her guest with the best tea she could muster; but it was harsh and cold, very different from Helen's creamy cups. Maria never could make tea. It mattered not what she put in, it was always the same. She poured, and calculated, and poured back again, till all were of the same horrid mediocrity. No one was allowed to have a taste, and it was indeed a chance if she suited that of any. Having both tea and coffee to manipulate on the night in question, and the presence of her supposed lover in addition to flurry her, it is to be feared that she gave young Rawden, the doctor's assistant, a mixture; for he was observed to be making as wry faces over it as if it were a tonic.

Maria was looking very well for her. She had on a fresh white muslin, with blue ribbons. Her mother had superintended her toilet, and at the close, done what she had perhaps never in her life done before, pronounced her approval.

Mr Smith certainly conversed more with Maria than Clare, Clare taking good care that he should, and keeping out of the way for that purpose; and it was on the day following that Mrs Hunt called at Freelands, and owned in confidence that if it *was* either, it was Maria.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WOMAN WHO OUGHT TO BECOME HIS WIFE.

We must, however, go back a little, and see what others were doing while the Hunts were making such progress.

On the Friday for which Mr Smith had had no less than three invitations, it will be remembered that he and Captain Wellwood were to dine at Sauffrenden, and that on Mr Smith's requesting Captain Wellwood's company on the way thither, Philip had granted it with the utmost readiness.

Their entrance together might astonish Lady Sauffrenden, but it could not her husband. He knew all along what nonsense it was that Milly had been talking, and hoped she would now see that Phil was not such a goose as she had made him out to be.

There were several other neighbours in the drawing-room, some of whom had called on the new proprietor, and some who had not; but those who had not, immediately resolved on doing so, seeing him dining at Sauffrenden, and escorting Captain Wellwood. He made his first appearance with *éclat*.

Lord Sauffrenden was markedly attentive to the stranger. As Mr Smith chose to stand in the background, he stood in the background likewise, and during the ten minutes which elapsed before dinner was announced, held him in conversation. Then Mr Smith was requested to take Miss Fulton in to dinner.

Miss Fulton had come with her brother the Admiral. She and the Admiral numbered among their acquaintance everybody of note within thirty miles of Fulton Hall; and many who did not know Miss Fulton otherwise, knew her by name. She was to be seen at every party, every meeting, every benevolent and social gathering in the neighbourhood; and her other brother being rector of Fulton parish, she took upon herself many of the duties of a curate; besides performing to admiration the part of amateur clerk during the church services. What poor dear brother would have done without her she did not know. The Admiral

was all very well, but the Rector was her pet, her favourite, her poor dear brother.

She regarded him as something between a fool and a saint; and was proud of his piety as of an honourable and thoroughly unremunerative distinction, befitting an old family, and by no means common in it.

Miss Fulton was handsome, clever, aristocratic, accomplished, and benevolent, but—eccentric. She was universally liked, but universally laughed at. Her genius was underrated because it was genius, and not common talent. Her performances were unappreciated, because of their originality.

Nevertheless, she was a welcome visitor wherever she went, and nowhere more welcome than at Sauffrenden. Lady Sauffrenden knew a gentlewoman when she saw her, and Miss Fulton was undeniably a gentlewoman. Lord Sauffrenden said this was the rock his wife split upon, and that if a man knew how to stand and how to bow, Milly would forgive his committing murder. To this he had subjoined, that if a woman knew when to speak and when to be silent, Milly would forgive her telling a lie. But Milly had indignantly repelled both accusations.

It was she who had arranged that Mr Smith should take Miss Fulton in to dinner; and the moment Miss Fulton rose and attached herself to Mr Smith's arm, an instantaneous conviction thrilled through the whole assembly, that that was the woman who ought to become his wife.

The Fultons were poor; and perhaps, considering the age of their family, it was not wonderful that it should have grown a little mouldy. It is difficult to provide for such families. They cannot beg, to work they are ashamed. The Fulton living provided for one son respectably, until, as one of the brothers sneered, he should be fit for Canterbury; at which time he would hold himself in readiness to take orders—the wildest, wickedest George among them all, was this—and meantime he and the others got on as they could; being in and out of debt as constantly as a cork on the water bobs under the wave and comes up again.

Then there was a widowed sister, who always hankered after the Hall, and announced that when dear Cornelia married, she intended to come and take charge of the dear Admiral. Dear Cornelia, however, was a long time in

marrying, and her spinsterhood was a jest among many who had not had a tithe of her offers. She was, it is certain, thirty-nine years of age, when she rose to take Mr Smith's arm, and in another year would be forty.

But then what a difference there is between thirty-nine and forty!

Fulton Hall was not above eight miles from Eastworld, where Mr Smith had built his house on the hill; and for the sake of that house, those grounds, those carriages, ten thousand a-year, and a husband, it was thought that Miss Fulton might yield her maiden dignity, and sink the name of Fulton in that of Smith.

In another year she would be forty, and that ought to be, if it were not, an additional inducement. If only Miss Fulton were not so eccentric, she might be depended upon to see things in that sensible light. It was time she was married. Mr Smith looked a quiet sort of man, probably easy-going and comfortable. His being at Sauffrenden was a guarantee for his good behaviour; and if allied to the Fultons he would be received everywhere.

Accordingly, when Miss Fulton put her hand within his arm, and sailed out of the room, with her long, bunchy, black dress sailing gracefully after her, there was a general sensation, not so much of interest or approbation, as of calm certainty that such a marriage would surely come to pass.

For the fair Cornelia's peace of mind, it was as well that this was all unsuspected by her. She was a great talker, and throughout the many courses her tongue might be heard in its usual strain of brilliant volubility, while she fanned herself, and ate the best of the good things with an appreciating palate and a most happy *insouciance*. After dinner, at Lady Sauffrenden's request, she sat down to the piano. The request was made because Miss Fulton's music was in the Hall. When she dined out she always sang afterwards; but her singing, like the other things about her, was accounted little of, because it was eccentric. It was customary for strangers in the neighbourhood to be asked by its inhabitants if they had heard Miss Fulton sing; and on their replying in the negative, to make them understand it was rather a joke. As soon as she began, they looked at each other, and those who were quite at the far end of the room smiled.

Now it is true, that had one in contemplation Miss Fulton's countenance, shoulders, or arms, during the performance, one must undoubtedly have seen something to laugh at. The roll of the eye, the wriggle of the neck, and the flights of the fingers, were ridiculous. But the singing itself was not. She had a fine, full, flexible voice, and her Italian pronunciation was perfect.

When Mr Smith heard her sing, he drew near at once to the piano. The song was one he knew, and he was enough of a judge to know immediately that it was well sung. He came to listen, not to look; and as he luckily stood behind the singer, there was nothing to distract his attention. He was able to enjoy it.

Captain Wellwood, however, was on the broad grin. Lord Sauffrenden stepped behind a window-curtain. The rest of the party, to hide their risibility, looked preternaturally grave; and the lady of the house, bolt upright upon her chair, kept guard over them all, and prepared to say her "thank you" at the end, with as much ardour as she could throw into it.

That Mr Smith, being at the lady's back, should come forward and follow up the "thank you" with a few words of genuine admiration, seemed to some of the party as good as declaring himself.

Lady Sauffrenden regarded it simply as a proof that he was, as she had said, one of the best-bred men she had ever met. She looked at him with new complacency in the silence that ensued, and which no one broke for some seconds.

The Admiral was engaged in confounding himself that he had not waited on his new neighbour before. Miss Fulton was expecting to be asked again, and the rest were watching her.

One thing Mr Smith noticed in the course of the evening. The Tolletons, who were neighbours of most present, who lived within two miles of Sauffrenden, and were nice people, living in a nice place, were never mentioned.

All sorts of scraps of gossip about one thing and another went the round, for Sauffrenden was emphatically a gossipy house; there was sympathy for one friend, smiles for another, interest and curiosity shown about a third, but one name was never heard. It was not his business, of

course, but still he would have been glad if the subject had been started. He was far from forgetting the glossy head beside his chair in the firelight; perhaps he had thought even more of it afterwards than at the time; and once or twice in the midst of Miss Fulton's animation, not to say flightiness, it rose before him with an odd incongruity. What connection could there be between two such opposite people?

The Tolletons, nevertheless, were not ignored so entirely as Mr Smith supposed.

Philip knew who would not ignore them, and was quite prepared for Sauffrenden's sly whisper when no one was listening, "Any news of *the T's*, eh?"

"It's all in training," with a glance at Mr Smith, who was at that moment engaged in paying his compliment at the end of Miss Fulton's "Il Segreto." "He is to dine there on Monday; I'm going too."

"Are you? I wish I were. What fun you'll have! What a nuisance it is that they can't behave like other people, and one could go to their house properly! Is it to be a dinner party? I wish I were going. I wish they would ask me."

"My dear fellow," said Philip, laughing, "nothing in the world would give them greater pleasure than to ask you. If an invitation is all you want, it is easily arranged."

"Well, well; you know what I mean. And so he is to be there, is he? I daresay it will be very pleasant. I daresay Helen will make herself very charming."

"I daresay she will—most certainly she will, if she does as she did the other day."

"When was that? Oh, on the drive. But have they met since? Do you think they have met since? It strikes me they must have been meeting somewhere between now and then, for it is nearly a fortnight since then, you know. Let me see. It was the day he was here—that was a Monday; was it last Monday? No, it couldn't have been, for that was the day we went to the far cover, and you came on Tuesday; it must have been the Monday before, and that makes it right, a fortnight next Monday. What do you think, eh?"

"Well, the fact is," replied Philip, as indifferently as he

could, but still with something of the inevitable guilty Tolleton air, "that I met him going to call there just after I left you on Tuesday; so, as you had given me the cue, I thought I might as well see what was going on."

"And so you went too?"

"Yes, I went with him."

"Well?" said Lord Sauffrenden, with the keenest interest. At this moment his wife was seen approaching. "Want anything, Milly dear? Don't tire yourself, my child; let me get it for you."

"No, don't mind, thank you, dear; it is only the key of the photograph-book. I am almost certain I put it on the table by this empty inkstand. Some one must have taken it."

"Oh, of course they have. It's in the book, dear. The book is on the other table, by Mr Smith; I daresay he has been looking at it."

"No, I want it for him. I put it there. But I do believe the key is in it. How could I be so stupid?"

Off she went.

"Well, Philip?"

"We had a grand time," said Philip, "and the old gentleman enjoyed himself immensely, no doubt. As for me, I was nowhere. What a girl that is!"

"Whew!" said Sauffrenden, with a little surprise. "Of course she is, that's nothing new. Besides, she is not the worst of them. Lily's worse, and Carry would be, only she can't get the fellows to take up with her, unless the others won't have them."

"Lily is odious," said Philip, shortly.

"And so the fair Helen really and truly—well, she might do worse. But it's such an absurd idea. What could have put it into her head?"

"I never saw anything like the girl!" exclaimed Philip, with vehemence; the remembrance of his visit was not so pleasant as he made out. It is hard on a man to be thrown aside like an old shoe, when a new one, however inferior in quality, fits better, and he had been accustomed for so long to fit the ladies at Freelands. "I never saw anything like the girl! She looks up at a man, and talks to him, and makes eyes at him, and goes on in such a way—it's no wonder a simple soul like that is no match for her."

"She means him to be one, nevertheless," said Sauffrenden, punning.

"Pshaw! she means nothing of the kind. That is to say, I daresay it may come to that, but all she thinks of now is to bring him to her feet. It's—it's a shame."

Again his friend felt surprise, but he only expressed confidence. "I think you're wrong there, Phil. I don't believe this affair will end like the rest. What fun could there be in bringing down an old bird like that?"

"A great deal more fun than a half-fledged one; but it may be as you think, after all. I wouldn't give twopence for Smith's chance of escape if it is so. If she really wants him, she'll have him in spite of himself."

"Well, he would get a wife that many would envy him. I daresay she is good-natured, and would tone down, and all that sort of thing. He might think himself very well off. I wonder how it will turn out. Milly has been turning the tables on me, you know. I said she was to find a wife for him, and so she has fixed on Cornelia. Look, she has settled them down with the photograph-book, and he had her at dinner. I daresay she'll tell me to-night it's quite a thing to be, but she doesn't know what we know. I would give twenty pounds to be at the Tolletons' on Monday night."

"Oh, to dare to say that!"

"Hang it, I forgot! But no one was listening. Well, remember to give me a full account; and now I'll go and talk to the Dowager."

The Dowager was a great-aunt of his own, who every now and then honoured Sauffrenden with her presence. She was as comely as a fresh skin, blue velvet, and diamonds could make her, and was in her way a great addition to the lots of people whose approach Captain Wellwood had heralded to the Tolletons.

Some of these had arrived, but many more were coming. Sauffrenden's sister Rosamond was coming, and his cousin Mary Percy, and "Fitz," who was a young Fitz-Charles in the Guards, and the Aytouns, whom nobody wanted, and several entire families of fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters, with their valets and waiting-women, so that their Christmas was going to be a merry one.

Philip was also to stay at the Castle; but when that

stipulation was made by his friend, it was accompanied by a whispered promise that every facility should be afforded him during the visit, for going to *the T's* as often as he chose. Indeed, it was plain that so delighted was Sauffrenden with the secrecy, the audacity, and the rivalry attendant on the Tolletons' new campaign, that however much he might envy every one who went to their house, he would no longer repine at their doing so.

Miss Fulton was much pleased with Mr Smith. He had been perfectly quiescent and passively polite, therefore she told herself that he had been agreeable. Then he had praised her singing, and with discrimination. And he knew people whom she knew at Naples.

This satisfied her. She was in good looks and good spirits, and having once ascertained that her companion was worthy of it, she bestowed upon him the full flow of her mind. As usual with her, she talked so much that she almost forgot whom she was talking to.

The Admiral, however, had not forgot. Ten thousand a-year, French cook, billiard-table, and '34 port—what a fool he had been not to leave his card before!

Confound the fellow's name! If he were Brown, Jones, and Robinson rolled into one, he didn't care. If Cornelia could only hook on there, it would be the snuggest anchorage for him that ever an old craft got into. He was already contemplating the loan of loose occasional hundreds, and considering how he could best manage to keep a couple of steady-going hunters at a brother-in-law's expense, when he was roused by the immediate presence of the object of his reverie himself. His sister was in the act of presenting him.

The Admiral made his best bow. He was at the same time more arrogant and less proud than she. From the time he had learnt the name of the man who was building the great house near Eastworld, he had contemptuously dismissed him, house and all, from his thoughts. Directly he met the stranger, a guest at Sauffrenden, heard of his wealth, and found him a bachelor, he was his very humble servant. He knew how to spread his sails to a fair breeze, whatever Corny did; and even she observed with surprise the lowness of his bow. She did not understand it. Thomas was not always so affable. Had she known what was in his mind, she would have bitten her tongue out with

shame. As it was, she was only a little agreeably astonished, and stood by for a few minutes, listening.

The Admiral entered into conversation at once in a bluff, hearty, off-hand way, whose openness seemed to guarantee, "Here he is! I'll answer for him! Simple old sailor, very friendly, true and honest to the backbone, and as guiltless of machination as a baby." The Admiral had hoped to have had the honour of waiting on Mr Smith before, felt quite ashamed to meet him anywhere but in his own house for the first time; but he must look it over, must consider old fellow's infirmities; no longer in his prime as Mr Smith was, and had been fairly tied at home by the leg.

Gout and rheumatism was his mixture, sometimes stronger of the one, sometimes of the other.

Capital doctor, Dr Hunt. Mr Smith had not yet had occasion for his services. Hoped it would be long before he had. Doctors were like Mother Carey's chickens, only to be seen in foul weather. Had a friend who was asked the other day for his doctor's name, and couldn't tell, for he hadn't consulted one for fifteen years? That was the sort of man to live with, and get an appetite for your meals. However, he must say for Hunt, that whenever he came to Fulton he stayed to dinner, and took his port like any other Christian.

Well—ah—fine open weather. The meet was at Fulton on Monday, would Mr Smith join them at breakfast?

He didn't hunt? Ah—but he might ride to the meet—would be very happy to see him; and Miss Fulton and the ladies would show him the old ruins afterwards.

Mr Smith thought he might ride to the meet; and, if he did, would certainly avail himself of the Admiral's hospitality. Miss Fulton had next to endorse the invitation, which her brother loudly informed her of.

She did it cordially; and he felt that he had now, at least, thrown out one grappling-iron. The ruins would do for Monday; and though he had been rather staggered by the not hunting, he was able presently to reflect that even that might turn out to his advantage. Brothers-in-law who don't hunt can't spend their money on hunters; and if there were no expensive taste to run away with the fortune, why, it was a thousand times the better. He would be able thus to indulge the few moderate desires of his dear

Cornelia's brother; and he could give Corny the hint whenever he wanted anything. Corny was a good soul, and, by George! it was time she had a husband; but he must take care how anything of that sort got to her ears.

He knew better than to start her on her high horse. No, no; all he had to do was to get Smith to Fulton, and manage the business himself.

As they departed, he took care to say, "See you on Monday, then?"

And Mr Smith replied, that he certainly hoped so.

When Monday came, however, all had changed. The weather was no longer soft and gently dull; there was heavy rain, and no break in the clouds gave hope of any thing better. It was not the sort of morning on which one cares to rise betimes, and ride eight miles to breakfast at another man's house. It was not a day for ruins, or anything else. Miss Fulton must wait.

He reflected that he was going out to dinner, and concluded to take his other meals at home.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WOMAN WHO OUGHT NOT TO BECOME HIS WIFE.

ALTHOUGH the Tolletons had made a great deal of their family bereavement as a reason for there being no dinner-party, it may be doubted whether, in any case, they would have been able to give one. As may have been gathered, they found some difficulty in collecting their neighbours when they wished to entertain.

In asking Mr Smith, it is true, they much preferred having him alone, or with the simple addition of Philip Wellwood, with whom they stood on no ceremony. But when they had wanted to have a dinner-party—and they had been very desirous indeed of giving one a few months previously—for reasons which have no place here, they had had such difficulty in getting it up, that in the end it had collapsed altogether.

The Fultons had made it clear they would not come

The Deanes, an easy-going father and mother, whose two sons cajoled or coerced them into a tolerable degree of intimacy at Freelands, were away from home. Mr and Miss Gray had accepted, and drawn back, offering a very shilly-shally excuse. And Mrs Rodney lost a relation the day the invitation was sent her. There was nobody left but the Hunts.

But the Hunts had been met so often at Freelands, by the people who were wanted for the dinner-party, that Helen had declared it was impossible they should be the only others present again. It would have an odd appearance. It could not be done.

That party, accordingly, had fallen to the ground, and it would have been perilous to attempt another.

"I really don't know that we could have managed one," said Helen, "unless we had got the Deanes. If they had come, and had had some people with them, it might have done; but there is no one else just now. After all, poor grandmamma's dying is not so very inopportune; it saves so much trouble."

"And will really be far pleasanter," said Lily, thinking of the dinner-party, though it sounded as if she meant a disrespectful allusion. "Come and make preparations now," added she.

When the preparations began, Corker knew at once that it was Miss Tolleton's party.

Helen never went into the kitchen on ordinary occasions, leaving the housekeeping department to Carry, who had a turn for it. On this day, however, she accompanied her sister, and took an interest in the bill of fare. She even engaged to find a special receipt for the cook, and did it. She wished the wild ducks dressed in a particular way. Men, she knew, loved wild duck.

The gardener had next a visit. She chose the plants for the table herself; and then snipped off every available blossom in the greenhouse, before his angry eyes. The last bunch of grapes was ordered to be sent in; and when the young lady lamented so feelingly that there was not one of each colour, Maclaren felt sure there was something in the wind.

The sisters dressed the flower-glasses in company—that they always did themselves; but Lily was sur-

prised to see her sister lay aside several small and choice blossoms.

"You can't make them bouquets when they aren't staying in the house," said she.

"They won't find fault with them on that account, Lily."

"But they will have them of their own."

"So they will! I never recollected that. Well, but a thought strikes me; I shall make them all the same."

Helen would not tell her thought. She laughed, and nodded, and said they must wait for it. The thought was, however, that if Mr Smith should come with a flower in his button-hole, she would show him the way to dispose of it.

Lily stood by and watched her sister, and laughed at her. Helen was not making the correct old gentleman's bouquet at all. The correct old gentleman's bouquet was large and gorgeous—not particularly fragrant, and quickly strung together. But Helen had taken the last sprig of verbena, and the one small velvety geranium, for Mr Smith; and Philip was to be put off with the rose.

"Philip will find it out, you may be sure," said she. "Here, let me make his. I daresay I could scrape together something better than that out of the greenhouse. And you might have given him the heliotrope when you know he is so fond of it. It's lost on the drawing-room table. Give me the scissors."

"It scents the room," said her sister, handing a thick empty stalk, while her eyes were fixed on the tiny bunch she held in her left hand.

"Scissors," said Lily, impatiently. "I'll see what I can do for him; but I think he might have that."

"Well, if you cannot get anything else, you may take it. There now, what do you think? That little bit of white makes it perfect. It's too good for him."

"Give it to Philip, then. He won't appreciate it, and Philip would. Guardsmen always do. They know better about these things than any other men."

"Indeed I shan't," said Helen, thinking in her heart that she had wasted too many bouquets on Philip already. "I have made it for Mr Smith, and he shall have it. And you are quite wrong about his not appreciating, Lily; I tell you what, I don't believe anything escapes him."

"You said it was too good yourself."

"I was only laughing. I wouldn't give him a poor thing for the world. One has a feeling that he has been accustomed to the best."

Lily looked at the scissors dubiously. "Now, mind," added her sister, with decision, "that you don't take the heliotrope, unless you really and truly cannot get anything else. I am sure that rose would have done very well; a rose is a great rarity at this time of year."

"Not one like that," said Lily, contemptuously. "A poor washed-out China bud! I should be ashamed to offer it to him, and I don't believe he would wear it, either."

"He would have to wear it."

"Would he? I don't think Philip knows what it is to 'have.' Certainly, he sometimes treats us rather cavalierly, don't you think? I daresay he is the same to every one."

One of Helen's bitter sensations passed through her as Lily spoke. She felt sure that he was not the same to every one; that others too presumed upon—upon what? Was it upon their being motherless, unprotected girls, or upon anything about themselves which invited freedom? It gave her a passing qualm, and her thoughts turned to Mr Smith with a new satisfaction. She was resolved that he, at least, should never find her too familiar.

When the two guests arrived, the ladies were all in the drawing-room, and Mr Tolleton received them in the hall.

The sisters were dressed alike, as usual; but as usual it was on the eldest chiefly that the dress was remarkable. She wore a white silk, short and plain in front, but flowing far behind; the open square showing her neck was edged with soft lace; and over the left shoulder was passed a black silk scarf, tied at the waist in a large bow. So far, all three were alike; but Miss Tolleton had seen when she was out several bunches of red arbutus berries, which she had plucked, and wreathed among her dark coils, instead of any other ornament. There were only two bunches ripe, and Helen took them both; not meaning to be selfish, but without a thought.

Lily had asked for one, and her sister had replied that in that case Carry alone must go without, and besides it

needed both sprays to make up an effective bunch—one without the other would be poor.

Lily saw the force of both arguments, and was resigned. She merely took note that it was a good idea, and resolved to remember for another time how becoming it would be to herself.

The moment the gentlemen entered the room, there was no doubt about their bouquets.

Mr Smith wore on his breast a small and very perfect pink and white streaked camellia; Captain Wellwood, one equally, if not more beautiful, of the purest white. Helen's first quick desire was that Mr Smith's should have been the white one. Then she wondered how it had become Captain Wellwood's.

This was soon explained. Mr Smith had given it to him—had brought it in the carriage and pinned it on himself. It was told while Helen was presenting her offerings, or rather saying how she had meant to present them; but now—cut short by Mr Smith's doing the very thing he ought, taking out his camellia, and begging her to wear it herself, while he replaced it by what she had made for him. If it had only been the white one!

This example of gallantry, however, was not imitated. Philip observed that, as his blossom was already a gift, he could not have the pleasure of asking any lady to wear it for him, but he should be most happy to put in both; and, so saying, crushed the bouquet into the same buttonhole.

The girls began to admire the camellias, and as both came from one greenhouse, they were at liberty to compare them.

The white one was clearly the favourite. Even their father was struck by it. He knew something of gardening, and his daughters were pleased that he should shine in such a respectable taste. He had seldom seen such a blossom, he must confess he wondered that Mr Smith liked to cut it. Mr Smith owned that his gardener, at least, had not liked cutting it. He had grumbled at defrauding a tree so early in the season, and hinted at rumours of a camellia show; but his master had pacified him outwardly with promises that if a show really took place, he should be allowed to contribute. "Provided," added Mr Smith, "he did not stint me till the thing was really announced." He

believed, however, that the man was in his heart by no means satisfied. Gardeners never were.

Then dinner was announced. It was rather a blow to Lily that, being the youngest, she was obliged to put up with her father's arm, and sit opposite Captain Wellwood. Now that Helen had openly discarded him, she felt persuaded that Philip would turn to her—if, indeed, he had not done so already.

But, in truth, Philip had never turned to her less.

Up to the present time he had, perhaps, if he had thought about it at all, preferred her to Carry. She was equally well-looking, and more amusing in her banter. Carry, placed in any other family, would have been a dull, quiet girl, put down as sensible, and admired for her reticence; but as it was, she imitated her sisters, and chattered and flirted as well as she was able. She had all their folly, with none of their wit.

Philip had been accustomed to amuse himself with Lily in a more easy and familiar manner than Helen liked, but he had almost ignored Carry.

On the last occasion, however, when he had been in their company, Lily had been fast going down in his estimation. There was a satisfaction in her glances at Helen; a mounting guard over her and Mr Smith; an air of warning off Carry; and of keeping herself and every one else out of the way, which was very offensive.

Helen might choose to marry Mr Smith, and, if she did, nobody need object; but she was surely able to carry forward the business herself, and guide him safely through its various intricacies up to the proposal point, without any need of her sister's acting spy, scout, and sentinel all at once.

If he spoke to Helen, Helen answered pleasantly enough, but Lily's eye was upon him. If he moved, she was at his side. He could not shake her off. He began positively to hate her.

Carry was now by many degrees the higher of the two in his estimation. She at least did not sanction the other arrangements. She ate her dinner almost in silence, and, when spoken to, answered as if she desired to be let alone. When let alone, Philip was certain that she was listening to the conversation at the head of the table. That Lily,

between whiles, was doing the same, he likewise felt convinced, but there was a wide difference between the sisters' listening.

Lily listened as if she liked it, as if she were inwardly congratulating herself upon it, and building up all sorts of future possibilities from it; Carry, with a sort of sulky determination not only to hear as much as she could herself, but by forcing others to do the same, prevent anything being said that could not be made public.

The sisters had instructed their father to be as cheerful and chatty, and make as much noise as he possibly could; but it is rather a difficult thing to make a noise all by yourself, and so the poor gentleman found it. He did his best. He addressed a joke to Captain Wellwood, and Philip regarded him with mild inquiry; he spoke to Carry, and she let fall the subject so quickly that he felt quite cross with her. Lily herself, from whom he had received his instructions, talked and laughed spasmodically; pinched his feet under the table to make him go on, when he had positively come to the very last dregs of what he had to say; put nonsensical questions in a loud, vacant voice; and altogether disconcerted instead of helping him.

At length the silence among the other four became of such long duration, that Helen was obliged to turn to her left-hand neighbour. Mr Smith at the same time began a general conversation on the topic of the day, and soon they were all talking together.

Still Philip felt that Lily's eye was upon him, and that she would have prevented his speaking with her sister if she could. In the evening it was the same, and it occurred to him that if this were to be always the way, he should not care to take advantage of Lord Sauffrenden's offer of facilities for going to *the T's* during his Christmas visit at the Castle, as much as he might have done once.

Helen sang in her slow, speaking voice, ballads, not over well sung, perhaps, but almost too full of force and meaning. Ballads about love, and hope, and despair, and other things that girls do not usually sing about. Sometimes she almost whispered, and let her eyes express what she meant to say; sometimes she threw out the words with fire. What was she dreaming of? Did she think to win him thus? Did she really fancy she could make this common,

comfortable, middle-aged, prosaic man imagine that hope and love, or even that blessed despair which is the heritage of true adoration, were for him? It was too absurd, too daring an idea. Yet there were no bounds to her ridiculous vanity, and perchance his credulity might equal it.

The mocking smile was still on Philip's lip, when a voice at his elbow made him draw back as if an obnoxious reptile had touched him. "Captain Wellwood, do come and let us have a game of four bézique."

"It is a game I never play, thanks."

"I am sure you do; you must have played it here. Not that we care very much for it, either. There are some games much better fun. What do you like?"

"Oh, don't wait for me; you can have three bézique, you know. I like music better."

Nothing more could be said. If a man has the courage to say boldly he likes one thing, it is impossible to urge him to the other, especially when there is no scapegoat who can be cited as the one to be obliged. Lily could not say "to please Carry," or even "to please papa," least of all "to please me." She was obliged to retire, and hide her mortification as best she might.

If people liked Helen's singing, it generally meant that they liked Helen. But what detained Philip was not Helen; it was simply the rare entertainment he found in watching her. He meant to stay, whether she liked him to be there or not.

It did not appear, however, as if Helen objected. She smiled on them both, united them in what she said between the songs, and listened with equally good grace to the compliments of either.

This went on most of the evening, and at last Philip thought he had had enough. She was quiet now, and more like her everyday self; he would allow her to play out her game. As she brought a little homely German air to a close, he moved away.

Mr Smith stayed where he was. He could not help contrasting his evening in this fascinating house with the dull dinner-party at Sauffrenden. True, had he minutely inquired of himself, he must have owned that he was not enamoured of the society of Mr Tolleton, and with the younger sisters he had not exchanged half-a-dozen words.

But if in Helen lay the charm, it was diffused on all around her. She cast a glamour in the eyes of those who looked, and they could not tell from whence it came.

Helen, in her white silk, with the arbutus berries in her hair, was quite as beautiful as in her plumy hat. It occurred to him that none of the ladies at Sauffrenden had worn natural flowers. He wondered still more that her own sisters, with such an example of taste before them, could select stiff artificial rosebuds. Thus we observe blindly. It never struck him that it might have been from necessity, not choice.

"I hope you take advantage of my path sometimes," said he, some time after Philip had gone.

"I did not know that we might."

"Indeed! I thought I told your sister so; but perhaps it was Miss Hunt. One of the young ladies said she had been obliged to take the long round by the highroad, and I felt so sorry that she should think of doing such a thing. I rather think I remember that it was Miss Hunt, but I hope that you will all make use of it, whenever it is convenient."

"Thank you; we shall be only too glad. It cuts off nearly a mile of the way to the village, and makes such a much pleasanter walk besides. Those beautiful woods were so lovely last spring, that we were tempted to trespass sometimes,—there being no one there, you know. Oh, I wanted to ask, Mr Smith,—are you going to have a summer-house at the view?"

"The view? I really don't know."

"Where the broken-down seat is, you know, where the long path comes out from the woods."

"I have never been there, Miss Tolleton, and had no idea that such a place existed."

"I wish I could describe it to you; it used to be my favourite walk in old times. Let me see; we go through the plantation—our plantation—first, climb over the stile, and strike into the wood path."

"Yes, and it leads into the avenue."

"Ah, but just where it joins the avenue, another little footpath turns to the left, and goes up the hill among the woods, a long, long way, before it comes out at the view."

"Really I had never noticed it."

"That must be because of the dead leaves. Unless you know it is there, it is probably so covered up just now, you would never find it."

"You say it is a favourite walk; will you and your sisters show it me some day?"

"Yes, certainly, we shall be delighted. And then you will put up a summer-house at the view, won't you? It would be such a delightful place for a summer-house, and the old tumble-down seat must be quite rotten by this time. I wonder you had never heard of the view; we think so much of it in these parts. There are four counties to be seen, and the cathedral tower, and it is supposed the smoke of London, when the wind is in the east, but that I doubt. However, you won't mind if that fails."

"I am quite curious to see the place. As for the summer-house, all you have to do is to name the spot, and a summer-house there shall be. And come as soon as you will; it shall be begun the next day."

"To-morrow, then?" said she, with sparkling eyes.

"To-morrow, if you please. And what hour?"

"Is twelve too early? We have an engagement in the afternoon."

"Twelve will suit me admirably. It is the best time of the day for walking. I shall be at the stile at twelve."

Then there was a pause while each was thinking about the sisters.

Helen was wondering whether they really must go, whether they were expected, or whether she might not leave them behind. She would rather have been without them. She liked having Mr Smith best by herself. She almost felt that if they went, it would spoil her walk altogether.

But still, if they were expected, there was no help for it —go they must; unless, indeed, she could invent apologies at the time. After a few minutes' reflection, she decided to have it so. She would not say a word about the expedition to any one, and if, when they met next day, Mr Smith inquired after her sisters, she would have their excuses ready. After the walk was over, it would be time enough to tell them of it.

Mr Smith in his own mind had a passing struggle likewise.

When he first proposed the party, he certainly intended it to include all the three. It was something in Helen's manner, nothing in her words, which conveyed the idea to his mind that she possibly meant to give him her company alone. He could not but own he would prefer this, although it was perhaps a presumptuous desire. Fortunately it did not rest with him, and he was able to close the compact cheerfully, content to wait for its fulfilment.

After this they joined the others.

Lily had grown quite boisterous in her laughter and nonsensical questions, plaguing and perplexing her father more than ever. Philip had quite deserted her; Carry had made some surly attempts at civility towards him, and they sat side by side, apart from the rest, yet apparently not caring to be together—like a couple of arch-conspirators, who, suspecting and distrusting each other, are bound by no ties of mutual regard, but merely by a common purpose.

Helen sat down on the sofa by her father, and Mr Smith took a chair opposite. Mr Tolleton's spirits revived, and Lily was subdued. Now and then she glanced at Captain Wellwood, but he and Carry still sat in their gloomy corner, gloomily conversing.

She was enraged with Philip. Her boisterous spirits were an attempt to conceal her mortification. She had reckoned upon the reversion of him. When he had shown distinctly that he was not in love with her sister, she had taken it for granted that he would, if not exactly fall in love, at least be on very friendly terms with her. Then Philip had shown he did not care to take this position. At least, he liked them all equally. It was not until this evening, that she found out that, openly neglected by Helen, he nevertheless preferred her.

This was hard to be borne. If Helen had monopolised him, and he had sworn even an unmeaning allegiance, it would have been quite the natural order of things in that house; but that, without the power of making him adore her, she should still have sufficient to make him prefer her, was more than her sister's fortitude could bear.

She was not angry with Helen, reserving her wrath for Philip. Helen was doing very well, and she only felt a slight increase of desire to see her fairly transformed into Mrs Smith. But she longed to vex Philip. And

it somehow took possession of her mind, that the louder she laughed and talked with her father, and the longer she left the other two alone by the piano, the better she could accomplish this end.

When Helen drew near to the fire, she expected to see Philip come forward also. Philip, however, remained where he was until the carriage was announced, and she felt faintly surprised. She concluded her judgment had been hasty. The case was not desperate.

A minute after the carriage was announced, Helen wandered off to the piano again, and began to put up her music. If Mr Smith had anything to say to her when he bade good-bye, he might have an opportunity of doing so without witnesses. Mr Smith had a word to say, and though unconscious of its being so, it may be questioned whether he would have been able to say it, had they not been out of earshot.

"Twelve o'clock to-morrow?"

"Yes."

They shook hands, and he passed on. Captain Wellwood did the same, with simply "good-night;" and the door closed behind him.

Helen finished putting up her music, closed the instrument, and came up to the others. "Well, I hope *you've* had a pleasant evening, Nelly," said her youngest sister, with a yawn. She did not speak crossly, and if her own evening had been pleasant, would assuredly not have yawned; but how soon we grow weary when we are not enjoying ourselves! Helen was not in the least tired, and owned that she had had a very pleasant evening.

"But you have nothing to tell us about it? I am sure you might have enough, for you and Mr Smith were all in all to each other, and spoke to no one else all night."

"Oh yes, we were great friends, but I am afraid there is nothing more to say. Our conversation would scarcely bear repetition."

"Now, Nelly, you know what I mean. Why can you not tell me outright? Is it to be, or not to be,—that is the question."

"Oh, to be, to be, of course. All in good time," said Helen, playfully. "Don't be alarmed, and don't be in

too great a hurry. We have only seen each other two or three times——"

"Quite enough too! What should you want more? He can see that you're handsome, and I should think you have had quite as much as you care for of his courting. Take my word for it, Nelly, the more he sees you the less he'll like you." Do what she would, Lily could not bring herself to speak good-temperedly.

Helen's eyebrows came together. "How stupid you are."

She felt that nothing would induce her now to tell Lily about the walk. Her coarse allusion to the courting, and the half-jesting, half-spiteful remark which followed it, decided her. As much as she cared for of his courting! Why, the courting had never begun. She felt persuaded that he had as yet no idea of such a thing. How long he would remain in such happy innocence, was another matter. Vanity whispered not long, and its flattering, buoyant visions made her soon break out again into her complacent smile.

"My dear child, you are too childish. Don't let your feelings run away with you so. I must tell you distinctly, and once for all, that he has never yet thought of me in the way you mean."

"Never thought of you!" She was accustomed to such very quick measures, when Helen was in the case. It was too disappointing.

"Well, I'm sure I did my best for you all to-night," said their father coming in, and yawning vehemently. "Heigh ho! Ho! ho! ho! My throat quite aches with talking. Mr Smith must think me a great fool, if I go on like that always."

"Poor papa!" said Helen, still complacent. "You did talk tremendously hard. I thought you were enjoying yourself."

"So I was, my dear, I'm sure, if you were. Well? You and Smith seemed great friends, eh?"

"I like him very much indeed, papa; and I think he likes me too." This was to reward them all.

"But she says he is never thinking about her," ejaculated Lily, who had no scruples about saying in plain terms what Helen would have merely insinuated.

"Well, well, time enough," replied Mr Tolleton, glancing at Helen, whose forehead had again drawn together.

"What should he be thinking of her for? I daresay he thinks she's a spoilt monkey, and so she is. Where's Carry? Gone to bed? I'll go too. Tell me when you want him here again, Nelly, and I'll get him for you. He will be ready enough to come when I ask him, I daresay."

Helen thought he would. She did not want him asked, however; she had other ways of working. She meant to have her walk on the morrow, but she meant to have it without the knowledge of her family. With this resolve fixed, she went to sleep, and nothing occurred in the morning to unsettle it.

CHAPTER X.

THE WALK TO THE VIEW.

WITH the rapidity peculiar to November, the weather had again changed, and that morning was soft and balmy, with abundance of sunshine.

Helen rose in high spirits. She had arranged in her own mind the night before, how Lily was to be disposed of; and as Carry seldom cared to go out in the mornings, nothing was to be apprehended from her.

Accordingly Miss Tolleton complained of headache, and the unseasonable warmth of the day. It was oppressive. She could not stay within doors—was restless and fidgety, and soon strolled out into the garden. By-and-by she returned from the greenhouse, bringing with her some foreign leaves which Lily had talked of painting.

"Look, Lily, I have brought these in for you. Do you want them?"

"I did not want them to-day," replied Lily, looking at the leaves ungraciously. "I am not in the mood for drawing. Why did you not ask me beforehand? I shall have to do them now."

"Oh no, they can be put in water. Let them wait till to-morrow, and they will be quite as nice. I thought you would be glad to have them—that was all. You said so the other day."

"Well, thank you, but I wish you hadn't. However, they won't keep fresh, of course; that flabby kind never does, so I must do them at once." And she languidly went for her colour-box.

Half an hour passed, when Helen suddenly threw down the book she was reading. "Come out for a walk, Lily."

"How can I, with these leaves to do? If you had only asked me before you cut them!"

"Oh, you have done enough for to-day. Leave them till to-morrow to finish. Come."

"You don't know anything about it. As if I could! They would be quite spoilt. I would not leave them now for the world."

This was as Helen had foreseen. She came and looked. Lily was getting interested, in spite of her disinclination for the job. She was succeeding, and that was enough. Everything else was now secondary.

"That part is well done," said Helen, "when you have rounded the edge a little more. I suppose it is not finished?"

"Finished! Of course not. There's a great deal of work in it yet."

"I must wait before I judge, then. Dear me! Will you come out in the afternoon?"

"Yes, for the light won't be good then. Can't you go by yourself now? You disturb me jumping up and down, and I don't like people looking over my shoulder. Go and think of Mr Smith."

Thus the way was cleared, and the scene properly prepared for, Lily's own hand drawing up the curtain.

Helen set out, slowly sauntering past the windows, then coming back to say in a laughing whisper that she was going to take the short cut, and as soon as she was out of sight, in the plantation, quickened her step to a brisk pace.

She no longer found the air oppressive. She was glowing with health and good humour when she came up to Mr Smith at the stile.

It was not quite twelve, but Mr Smith had been waiting there some minutes. His first glance ascertained that she was alone, and his spirits rose. Not a word was said by either about the sisters, and as their hands and eyes met, Helen saw all was right. Either he had not expected them,

or he did not wish for them; whichever it was, it was plain that he had no misgivings, he had trusted the matter entirely in her hands. Every drawback was now removed, and the thing was to get away into the wood-path as quickly as possible.

He had already discovered the path, and wondered how it had hitherto escaped his observation.

They began to climb, rustling through the dead leaves of the bank, and walking as fast as a good deal of hindrance, in the shape of wet and slippery ground, would permit, until a tolerably large-sized hillock was put between them and any chance observer on the road.

Then the pace slackened, and talking began.

Mr Smith spoke of the alterations and improvements he had been that morning superintending, and in which his companion showed a ready interest. She at once comprehended his satisfaction in pulling down uninhabitable cottages, and putting up in their place good solidly-built commodious ones. Her sympathy was called forth by his accounts of the discomforts, the positive degradations he had found his tenants enduring. She entered into his plans, his schemes, as if she had been a part of himself. He found himself talking to her as if they had a joint interest in the welfare of these people. In explaining his projects, he had nearly spoken of what "we" must do. Such curious similarity of tastes must be his apology. She really seemed as if all that he was about to do had been in her heart likewise. It was the most delightful encouragement.

"Mr Rodney tells me," said he, warming, "that the people here are a warm-hearted, affectionate, grateful set. They are naturally disinclined to trust an utter stranger, but I expect we shall get on capitally by-and-by. I mean to get to know them personally, and that is only done by living among them. It seems to me both foolish and absolutely wrong to be responsible, in a great measure, for the welfare of one's fellow-creatures, and, to save trouble, leave it in the hands of agents who, as often as not, are unprincipled, and regardless of anything but making the most money they can out of them. I propose being as much as possible my own bailiff. At all events, my bailiff shall have no authority but what he gets from me."

To this she assented with an eagerness of approbation that made it plain these had long been her own sentiments.

"And going about among them one sees things as they really are—at least as far as can be seen," he went on. "They are not put before you in one light or another; they are just plain facts, about which you must use your own judgment, under the Divine direction, and then, come what may, you have done your duty."

Yes, certainly, and that was all that was required of one, acting for the best; but the "Divine direction" rather startled her. He must be a religious man. She was not sure that she was quite prepared for that. Still it was a blessing he was not a Dissenter. If—if anything came of it, she would be allowed to make her deep curtsey in church all the same.

"I think," said he next, "I must get Lord Sauffrenden to give me a few hints about the drainage. His land, I am told, is by far the best drained of any in the county. He has been doing it lately on some new system."

This was far better. Lord Sauffrenden and drainage were more in accordance with her views than Mr Rodney and cottages. She could not indeed appear to be at home in this matter, but that was not needed. She could question, and be instructed, and show sympathy. And then she could draw him on to speak about the house. The house was all very well, but the absence of an approach on the south side was an inconvenience. He was meditating opening up one through the woods; he had his eye on a family who were the very people to put into a lodge. He meant to have a couple of new lodges.

She could not do more than listen to this. She could hardly as yet show approval of new lodges. They had it, however. Several fine views of the house were obtained from the path, and at each one she felt increasingly better inclined to be the mistress of it.

Mr Smith in his turn was charmed with the woodpath. It led through by far the most beautiful part of the grounds. He must have it attended to, not spoilt by being made too trim, but clear of rubbish, and gravelled.

The gravel was suggested by frequent difficulties. There were places so soft from recent rain that they were only

to be crossed by scrambling up the bank, and holding on by the bushes.

Helen appeared to her usual advantage here. She disdained assistance, stepped hither and thither, held back the branches for him, found her own way, and jumped the bank to admiration.

"There is another bad part in front, I am afraid," said he, when they had just struggled on to firm ground again. "I am afraid, Miss Tolleton, we shall have to go up the side again."

"Not if the stepping-stones are there still. Look, it is all right, there they are, and they go right through the worst."

She sprang from one to another, he following less nimbly.

"Now that is the last of them, and it is quite dry the rest of the way. All the water runs down here from the heights, you see. There are no more bad places."

"You seem to know the way well?"

"I used to come here often, alone."

"I wish I had been here then."

"In that case perhaps I should not have come."

"You certainly would not have come alone."

"Would you have come with me, Mr Smith?"

"If you would have allowed me, Miss Tolleton."

They were laughing into each other's faces. The charm was beginning to work.

"Oh, what ferns!" cried she next, "what beautiful ferns! I must have some of those ferns, please."

Of course he liked cutting them, she standing by his side, receiving them as they were gathered. Then he wanted to give her more than her hands would hold. Then she was saucy, and threw away some which she declared he had spoilt. They were beautiful ones, but he had been very careless, and had not cut them properly, and he must do it better another time. They took up a root together. Then they agreed it was not worth carrying home. Then she said it was he who had said so, and he affirmed he was sure she thought it.

A great deal of time passed, and still they had not got to the view. Mr Smith had almost forgotten what he had been brought there to see. It took him unawares, and he was surprised into great admiration and delight.

For some time the little path had been getting steeper and steeper, but there had been no signs of an opening in the woods. Suddenly it emerged on a small plateau, evidently cleared by art; and it appeared this was the end.

On every side it was surrounded by trees. Beneath were cliffs so perpendicular as to form a dangerous precipice, terminating as they did in a bushy incline, at the bottom of which rolled the river.

Beyond the river were lanes, fields, and hedgerows; dotted here and there with red-tiled farmhouses half-hidden by ivy, the growth of years, and nestling in their ample stackyards.

In the distance the blue smoke of a town with its cathedral tower, could dimly be discerned against the sky.

Helen turned to her companion with a sense of proud proprietorship. "What do you think of it? Have I exaggerated?"

"Indeed no, it is all that you promised me. It is beautiful—perfectly beautiful, a true English landscape with all its best suggestions. How shall I thank you for the pleasure this has given me? But for you, who knows how long I might have remained in ignorance that such a spot existed?"

"And look, that is all they have done for it!" said she, pointing to the rude bench which had fallen to the ground on one side, and was evidently in the last stage of decay.

"One had almost better make a seat of the rocks," sitting down as she spoke.

"There shall be a summer-house," said Mr Smith, looking round, "where that seat is now. It will be a pleasure to me to design it myself. Anything that you can suggest, you may depend on seeing carried out."

Helen felt her triumph. It was not on the words, however, that she placed dependence. "Words really mean very little," was her private judgment, "it is the look and the manner which mean everything." Mr Smith's look and manner were animated, and she felt sure she was gaining ground.

He sat down upon the rocks beside her, and they exhausted the subject of the summer-house. Helen then entered on a topic she had earnestly desired to open the evening before, but durst not, lest the unguarded speeches

of her father or sisters might show what she desired to conceal. She wished to hear about Sauffrenden.

"You have not told me anything about your dinner-party on Friday," she began, "and in our quiet neighbourhood we like to know everything about everybody."

"It was a very dull dinner-party."

"Well, but that says nothing; you must tell me who were there, and all about it, and then I can estimate the dulness."

"The Rector was there, and Miss Gray. Admiral and Miss Fulton. And an old Lady Wranch or Wrench, an aunt of Lord Sauffrenden's, I believe; and several others I did not know."

"Why, I think you were pretty well off. The Fultons are pleasant people."

"I had never met them before; but they seem so, certainly."

"And who had you to take into dinner, if it is a fair question?"

"I had Miss Fulton."

"Then, Mr Smith, you were well off. She is a most amusing and agreeable companion. Do you not think so?"

"Amusing, certainly."

"And agreeable? Every one thinks her agreeable."

"Yes, agreeable in a certain degree. But perhaps she is almost too agreeable to be completely so. If you know what I mean, though it is invidious to point out such a defect, she has rather too much agreeability."

"You are severe. Can a woman be too agreeable?"

"Certainly not, but she can try to be so too much."

"And is that all poor Miss Fulton's crime?"

"Yes, that is all. I liked what I saw of Miss Fulton very much; but if I must say so, she talks too fast, and too loud; and, may I dare to add, too much?"

"Oh, Mr Smith!"

She was not quite certain what to say. She had no idea he would prove so particular.

"Too much," said she, thoughtfully; "I wonder if I do." From the bottom of her heart the words came; she was no more coquetting than if she had been in her own room alone.

The answer was as quick as thought. "You? No, indeed."

She blushed crimson. How provoking that she should have appeared to be seeking this! As if she had deigned to angle for a compliment! Appealed for flattery which could not but be paid. It was too stupid of her. And he had said it so earnestly, so emphatically, that he must have thought it was what she wanted. She sprang from her seat, vexation on her brow.

He rose also, surprised at the sudden cloud. "You are not angry with me, Miss Tolleton?" Angry? Her bright smile shone out again, "*You! No, indeed.*" All was right.

There was more dallying on the way home. More difficulties in getting over the muddy places. More holding on by the branches.

The chit-chat began again, and all too soon the stile came in view.

Simultaneously they looked to see if the road were free. Mr Smith helped his companion over the stile, and they paused to say good-bye.

Helen put the ferns into her left hand. "Next time," said he, taking her right, "that you and I come here together, I hope it will be to inspect the new summer-house." Not much in the words, but they were suggestive.

"And now," said Helen to herself, as she walked swiftly through the plantation, "how much and how little of this shall I give them the benefit of? If I told the whole, Lily would be ridiculous. So then, we met, no matter how, and walked together; shall I say where? Yes, for it will come out about the summer-house. Whatever I tell her, however, she must be made to hold her tongue about."

Then she fell to musing on what had passed. His words, his looks, were dwelt upon, and weighed in the balance. How much meaning could she safely attach to them? How far could she calculate upon him? That he admired her, was interested in her up to a certain point, she felt certain; but was the amount sufficient to bring him to her feet? Not yet. The result of her meditations was this—not yet.

Luncheon was over, and the sisters eagerly speculating on the chances of Helen's luck having again thrown Mr Smith in her way. It was two o'clock when she entered the house. She had no idea it was so late, and, smiling,

bade them wait for her adventures until she had satisfied her appetite.

"Adventures! Then you had adventures!" cried Lily. "Here is your chop; we put it down to the fire at once, so it is only tepid; and the potatoes are on the bar. What adventures? I do believe it was Mr Smith!"

"And here is your porter," said Carry. "I didn't pour it out, in case you would rather have something else for your headache. If you would, I'll finish the porter myself."

"Let us ring for another bottle, Carry," said Lily. "I'll share it with you, for my back aches with sitting so long at those leaves. They are a great success though, Helen. But now, what adventures? Do begin. You can talk and eat too."

"No, I can't;" teazing a little was what Helen enjoyed. "But I shall be ready directly. I met somebody, Lily."

"I know you did! Mr Smith! Another small bottle, of porter, please"—(to Corker).

"I do wish you would take more care before the servants," frowned her sister. "Corker must have heard."

"No, nonsense. And what if he did? He may hear me say it a hundred times if he likes. Mr Smith! Mr Smith! Mr Smith! There now, Nelly; if you won't tell me, I'll tell myself. Now you had better begin, or I shall inform him outright. Here he comes."

She restrained herself, however, whilst the porter was being poured out, and as she had done so, Helen began as soon as they were again alone.

"Well, if you will be quiet, I'll tell you. Yes, it was Mr Smith—(I knew it!) And I have been with him for the last two hours!"

The effect of this announcement was rapture. "Oh, you dear good creature, then you really *are!* Oh, what fun! What would Mrs Hunt say? You sly thing, why did you not tell us before? And now for the how, when, and where."

"At the stile, in the short cut. You told me to go and think of him, you know, so it was that which conjured him up."

"But what was he doing there?"

"Waiting for me, apparently. At least, it seemed as if he had nothing else to do, for he was at my service directly."

There is no blind like the truth spoken in jest. Lily was taken in at once.

"Well?"

"Then we set off together, but you will never guess where."

"To the house?"

"The house! What can you be thinking of? As if I could have gone to the house!"

"Why not? I thought, of course, it was there," in a disappointed tone. "There is no other particular place to go to. I thought he had been showing you over the house."

"And you thought I would have gone? Lily, you really are too absurd. I told you not to go on so fast, and you go faster and faster. I wonder, instead of thinking I had been to the house, you did not imagine I had been to the church! You seem to expect that to be the next thing."

"It will come to that," said Lily, readily. "But where did you go to, then?"

"To the view."

"The view?"

"Yes. Was that not a particular place?"

"And what did you talk about?" inquired Carry, opening her lips for the first time since Mr Smith's name had been mentioned, but still relenting towards the subject, since it became plain the thing was to be.

"All sorts of things. Improvements, cottages, Mr Rodney, drainage, and dirt."

"You talked of those?" said Lily, incredulously.

"Indeed I did, and talked beautifully; but as they don't suit your carnal mind, perhaps it will please you better to hear that we also talked of Lord Sauffrenden, and of two new lodges, and an approach through the woods."

"Very good; but that is not what I want to hear about, all the same."

"Do you want to hear about the summer-house?"

"What summer-house?"

"A summer-house at the view. There, you will like that; and when the summer-house is there, he shall give us some fun at it."

Lily looked at her sister shrewdly. "Was it to please you?"

"Well, yes, in a way. To please himself, too. And the path is to be gravelled, which will be a great improvement. I never saw it so bad as it was to-day."

"And when is it to be done; not till summer, I suppose?"

"It is to be begun to-morrow."

"Then, Helen, he *is* thinking of you."

CHAPTER XI.

AN OLD FRIEND IS A YOUNG MAN.

After all this, it was really too delightful when Mrs Hunt bridled and looked mysterious, saying that if it was either, it was Maria.

We have now come up to the point when she paid her afternoon visit at Freelands, and fell a prey to the girls' love of fun and ridicule. Lily only concealed her enjoyment by leaving the room, and even Helen, demurely as she sat at her visitor's feet, was obliged to cast down her eyes.

Mrs Hunt had untied her bonnet strings, and taken off her shawl, and altogether behaved on this visit in a more friendly way than she had ever done before at the Tolletons. She had called the day after their little entertainment, on purpose to let them know that Mr Smith had been there. It was a week after the Tolletons' own dinner-party, and her third essay to secure him had had the luck usually assigned to that number.

Neither Maria nor Clare were with her; they had gone to the Rectory, but would take the short cut, and join their mother in time to accompany her home. It had been Mrs Hunt's plan. She wished to have the best part of her visit by herself; to be able to throw out pregnant suggestions which might rankle in the Tolletons' bosoms, to plant seeds of doubt and apprehension which must in due time bear the proper fruit of hopeless despair. If Maria had been with her, this might not have been so easy

This was, however, only a part of her mission. Like other great ambassadors she had her apparent and her non-apparent business. She had to learn as well as to communicate.

If Maria's simple attractions had really and truly defeated, by their simplicity, the lures of these wily ladies, they would surely by this time have found it out. She thought at least they would, but she would fain be certain. She wished to discover how much they suspected; she wondered if it were possible that they could have suspected nothing.

In that case her task would be easy and delightful. She would enlighten them with all the delicacy in the world; but gently as she would plant the arrow, it should be poisoned. If they really still imagined they were going to have it all their own way with Mr Smith, it was only her duty to open their eyes. She little knew whom she had to deal with. It is true that on other occasions the Miss Tolletons had not been as reticent as perhaps prudence demanded, with regard to their love matters. They would freely tell who came six days in the week, and who seven. They made confidences and confessions, with heedless prodigality.

But now they were wise. They knew Mr Smith. Instead of increasing his attentions, any remarks coming to his ears were, Helen felt convinced, more likely to put a stop to them altogether.

He was not aware of having paid any; nor, indeed, strictly speaking, had he. She owned to herself without a blush that, so far, the outside he had done had been to receive hers. She had therefore warned her sisters to be circumspect, and as they both now entertained high hopes of a serious ending to what had begun in jest, they were prepared to be obedient to whatever her penetration and knowledge of the subject should dictate.

Accordingly Mrs Hunt was ill prepared for the line of action decided upon.

Miss Tolleton inferred, if she did not exactly say, that they had seen nothing of him. Was he not away from home? Papa and he were great friends when he was at home, and they all thought him such a very nice old gentleman. However, she must not say "old" to Mrs Hunt,

perhaps. There were whispers which she must not mention—must not disturb her with. Had she not heard? Was it possible she had not heard? But then people always were the last to hear anything about themselves. It was just as well. Mrs Hunt must not press her; because, if she did, it would be sure to slip out; she never could keep secrets. No, she would not tell if she could help it; Mrs Hunt would be vexed. People would talk—it was vain to try and stop them. If there was nothing in it, the report would die out of itself.

Mrs Hunt, with burning cheeks, begged at least to hear the report. It was hard if the report had anything to do with her and hers, that she might not even hear it. She put her hand on her young friend's head as she spoke, and her tone was quite affectionately pathetic.

Helen played with her rings. She really did not know. She did so dislike gossip. At any rate, Mrs Hunt must not be angry with *her*. She must understand that none of them had ever given the slightest countenance to the story. Their answer had invariably been, that if there were any truth in it, they could trust Maria and Clare to bring the news to Freelands themselves. Of course, till that was done, they could never think of making inquiries. Of all things, they would shun being thought intrusive. However, if Mrs Hunt would promise—it was about Mr Smith.

Then indeed Mrs Hunt felt that she had done the girls injustice. Helen's voice was music in her ears.

About Mr Smith, and one—report did not say which—of the Miss Hunts. All she wanted to say was, that they might rely on her and her sisters' discretion; the subject should never be alluded to before any one, if Mrs Hunt would just say so much, was it Maria?

Poor Mrs Hunt! How elated was her crest! How well, and modestly, she thought she did her part!

The many iniquities of Freelands were condoned, the sisters for the time were almost as much to her as to her daughters. Helen had never been looking better. What a handsome creature she was, and how improved in manner! Her attention had been quite wonderful, and she had sat and chatted with her for nearly an hour before the girls came in, as pleasantly as possible. Yes, she would own she could be as agreeable as anybody when she chose.

This was for Maria and Clare going home.

"Lily seemed in great spirits," observed Clare, thoughtfully.

"Oh, she's a silly creature that's always in spirits," said her mother, in whose eyes Lily had not gone up so high as the others. "She's one of those that can't help laughing when there's nothing in the world to laugh at. Once or twice when we were sitting talking quite quietly, Helen and I, she began to smirk and giggle, as if one of us had said something ridiculous. It's a bad habit to get into, as I have always warned you two. I must say that, for Helen, she is by far the best behaved of any of them. I'm really astonished Mr Smith does not admire her!"

"Carry was very good to you too, mamma," said Clare, with a quick suppressing glance at Maria, who she feared was about to commit herself.

"Yes, Carry was civil enough; but she is not so good-natured as Helen. Helen says very pretty things. I must say I had a nice visit, and I really think the girls much improved."

"My dear," as soon as she got home, "I do think those Tolleton girls are improved. We had quite a pleasant time there this afternoon. Helen made me take off my things, and settle myself comfortably; and she and I sat and chatted away till the girls came. I assure you I was quite surprised to see them—the time had passed so quickly."

"You must have been deep in your neighbour's affairs, Polly. Come, now, what tit-bit of scandal had the fair ladies picked up for you to-day, that you were quite of one mind about? Who has been committing some atrocious delinquency, exceeding even themselves? Or what have you learnt new about Mr Smith?"

"Oh fie, doctor—to think such a thing! Can't I have a pleasant afternoon without your talking such nonsense? Mr Smith, indeed! I am not likely to learn much of Mr Smith at Freelands, from what I hear. They thought he was away from home. Anything new about Mr Smith will have to come from another quarter, I suspect. Girls, go and take off your things, if you don't want to be late for tea."

"It was about Mr Smith, all the same, however," said she, as soon as the door closed. "You are so sharp, my

dear, there's no putting you off. Well, what do you think? It's all over the place that he's after Maria!"

Looking at her triumphant face, a smile gradually irradiated his.

"Do you really mean to say so?"

"Indeed I do! and on the very best authority—though you will hardly believe me—Helen Tolleton herself. Now I'll tell you what I think. Of course it must have been dreadful to them, after the open way they went after him—Helen in particular; and that makes it all the more certain. She wouldn't wish to believe it, you know, as long as she could possibly help; but she has got the sense to see the thing is done, and wishes to put a bold face on it."

"Will they try to put Maria off him, do you think?"

"If they do I'll be even with them. But no, they won't. I do think they have a sort of kindly feeling for our girls; and if Maria became Mrs Smith, they reckon they would be up at the Hill all day long. A fine thing for them; they would make good use of her. No, I don't think they would wish to put her off him. If he doesn't take up with themselves, I do believe they would as soon Maria had him as anybody."

"And what had Miss Helen to say about it? Where had she picked it up, I wonder?"

"She wouldn't name names; but I suspect it had come from more quarters than one. However it was I said it was Maria—that is to say"—alarmed at her husband's face—"she said it was one, and begged to know which. So I said I was sure *we* had never thought of such a thing, and had never noticed anything particular from Mr Smith to either; but that if it *was* either, it was Maria."

"I would not have said it—I would not indeed. I wonder, Polly, at your committing yourself to that. Now it will be set about everywhere that we told them it was Maria."

Care sat upon the doctor's brow, in spite of his wife's soothing.

"Oh no, it won't, Robert. You needn't fear. That Helen is a good-natured creature on the whole; and she begged so hard, and promised so faithfully not to tell. She would hardly tell me, till I made her. She seemed to be quite afraid I would be put out. I told her idle reports

never put *me* out, and made believe I put no faith in it. I daresay she thinks we have many such. But I said I wouldn't have it repeated to the girls. She promised me that."

"She mayn't repeat it to the girls, but she may to worse people. However, it cannot be helped now; I only hope it won't get round to Smith. They would never go to him with it, eh?"

"That you may be quite easy about, my dear. From Helen's whole way of talking, I am convinced they see very little of him."

"You think he is quite off there, then?"

"If he ever was on. Perhaps I was rather hasty; but I know they never can let a man pass, be he what he may, as old as an owl, and as ugly as a hippopotamus. However, whether that was all or not, it's plain he never had any thought of them; and I'm bound to say Helen gave me the impression to-day, that there never was, nor had been, anything between them."

Which was exactly the impression Helen intended to give.

She knew—who better?—that Mr Smith was not away. If he had been, how could he have brought down that delicious little plan of the summer-house for her inspection, the very day before? And how could she have accompanied him to the edge of the plantation, when he went away? And how could he have been obliged to go away sooner than he need otherwise have done, because he was going to meet an old friend at the station? And how could they be expecting him to bring the old friend to luncheon the very day after Mrs Hunt's call? No, no; he was safe at home. And Miss Helen, you ought to have ascertained at least that Mrs Hunt had not caught a glimpse of the grey hat on its way through the plantation, or laid hold of its wearer elsewhere, and wormed the truth out of him.

Mr Smith, in his integrity, would have seen no reason either for evasion or concealment. It might have been a bad business.

Nothing of the kind, however, had happened, and she thought no harm was done. She was bright and confi dent, and spruced herself up gaily for the old gentleman's luncheon next day

Early in the morning she had reminded Carry of Mr Smith's foreign residence, and suggested the propriety of a few made-up dishes. Papa was told to stay at home and make himself fit for company; and punctually at half-past one o'clock the company arrived.

Mr Smith had talked of an old friend, and the sisters had concluded he meant one of his own contemporaries. They were rather taken aback, in consequence, when a slender elegantly-formed young man, whose age certainly could not exceed thirty-five, followed him into the room, and was named as Sir George Lorrimer.

Miss Tolleton had nothing to regret. She knew Sir George by name, and knew that there was a Lady Lorrimer. She was proud of Mr Smith's acquaintance, and pleased that he should wish to make his, theirs. She was seen to the best advantage. Beautiful, graceful, hospitable, unembarrassed, her manners just what they ought to be. Sir George was caught, "by Jove!"

When first told that he was going to a Mr Tolleton's, a neighbour's, to luncheon, he had wished Mr Tolleton at the bottom of the sea. A country lout who would drag him out to inspect his farming, his pigs, and his poultry. Mr Smith's remarking that the young ladies were reputed beauties mended the case a little; but it was not until he had seen the eldest daughter, that he gave over considering the engagement an unmitigated bore.

The other sisters were not worth looking at.

Poor Carry! poor Lily! The truth was, they had not changed their dresses. Mrs Hunt's eulogium on their neatness might be just, but they looked dowdy beside their brilliant sister. Lily had laughed at Helen for taking so much trouble, but she now earnestly wished she had done the same. And Helen had urged her to do it, said it was very little trouble, that a black silk never got harmed, and that it looked odd for one to change and not the others.

For this the others had their answer. Why then did she do it? She had looked quite nice before, and her beautiful lace square and sleeves would certainly not keep clean long if they were to be worn on every such occasion. Mr Smith would have liked her just as well as she was. There had been a little tiff between the two parties, harmlessly ending in each taking their own way.

Miss Tolleton had coiled her hair afresh, and put on the new dress, and a band of scarlet velvet round her throat. Lily contented herself with a clean collar, and washing her hands. Carry, after the tiff was over, forgot all about it, and the luncheon-party besides; and was caught in the drawing-room just as she was.

The consciousness of this, joined to the usual unavailing regrets, confused the two culprits, and the evidence the new-comer was not slow to give of his considering them inferior, altogether quelled them. Sir George, in fact, imagined they were still in the schoolroom. They had entirely the look of two blooming awkward school-girls. They seated themselves at table without a word, and even Lily remained nearly mute the whole time of luncheon.

Helen came out all the better for the dull background. She and her father had plenty to say, and she, at least, said it well. With Mr Smith they seemed on the easiest terms. Sir George observed with a little surprise the animation with which his fair neighbour addressed his friend. For him were her sparkling sallies, her playful repartees. For him several retrospective allusions which seemed enigmas to the rest. Her opinion was sought in return, and her wishes consulted.

It appeared as if they understood each other. He looked at Miss Tolleton once or twice, and after considering that she was a lively girl as well as a pretty one, it suddenly dawned upon him that she was a clever one too.

This must be looked into. He delighted to unravel a scheme, to pick out the kernel of a secret. It was something worth coming for; it gave an interest to the day. Had they not been expected at the Castle, he would have liked to remain a little after luncheon; to spend the afternoon, in fact. They were expected, however, and had promised to call early, not to keep any one at home.

"Nice chatty little woman, Lady Sauffrenden," said Sir George.

"We don't know her," replied Helen, calmly.

So much Mr Smith had by this time become aware of. No one had assigned any reason, or indeed had openly stated the fact; but he had discovered the fact, and longed to know the reason.

If Miss Tolleton had appeared confused, had tried to

slur it over, had offered any excuse, all would have been plain; but her quiet "We don't know her," made all the "don't knowing" appear to be on their side. It had now the aspect of a good, honest, neighbourly quarrel.

When Helen asked Captain Wellwood after Lady Sauffrenden's health in that thoughtful manner before mentioned, it was merely for the sake of relieving an awkwardness. She had no thought of blinding him. She had no intention of deceiving Mr Smith. Philip, she knew, was already aware how it was, and Mr Smith soon would be. The affectionate inquiry had answered its end, but now the subject must be treated differently.

Sir George, as well as Mr Smith, took it as she intended.

"A peppery little person, you know," said the former, confidentially, afterwards. "She always did like to have the high hand, and I dare say gets Sauffrenden into hot water sometimes. What a good fellow he is! I never knew a better fellow in my life."

"I always thought there was something," said Mr Smith, reverting to the Tolletons. "It was never said, but I felt sure there was. I have heard Miss Tolleton ask most kindly after Lady Sauffrenden, but I could not gather from that, whether they were acquainted or not."

"*That* was very plainly said to-day, however. Perhaps the little woman objects to having such attractions too frequently at the Castle. No, not on any particular account, of course; but you know it is a fact that the pretty creatures positively *can't* like each other, however much they try."

"That is one of your abominable notions, which you try to pawn off on other people. It is not a fact to me. You must find some other reason."

"'Pon my word, I can't. Sauffrenden's no dangler, or I should say he had been——"

"No, no, Lorrimer, that won't pass either."

"Then, depend upon it, Mr Tolleton's cat has been hunting the woods and got trapped."

"That is far more likely."

"Or his dog killed a pheasant."

"More likely still."

"Or he hands the plate too regularly at church; or he

objects to smoking in the railway carriage; or—or—his daughter is too pretty by half."

This Mr Smith vehemently denied.

Carry and Lily revenged themselves for their enforced retirement into the shade as soon as Freelands was itself again. "Helen, you told us he said an old friend."

"So he did; those were his words. How could I tell any more than you that the old friend would prove a young man? You'll wish now you had done as I asked you about your black silks."

"But who would ever have guessed," said Lily, in an injured voice, "that an old fusty Mr Smith—I beg your pardon, Nelly, but it is the truth—that he should have had a friend like that?"

"And a baronet to boot!"

"I rather wondered you did not waver in your allegiance, my dear. I gave you great credit for not transferring your *petits soins* at once to the new aspirant."

"Aspirant! Nonsense!"

"You chose to consider him such, whether he was or not—I knew by your way."

"If you knew so well," said her sister, nettled, "it is a pity you did not know a little better. There is a Lady Lorrimer."

"How did you find that out? I don't believe it."

"Believe it or not, as you like. You might have heard Mr Smith talk of her if you had kept your ears open."

"Open they must have been indeed, for I never come within a hundred yards when you are talking, on purpose to be out of the way."

"Well, there is, then; she was one of the Adcourts."

"Is he come to stay?"

"That I don't know. I tell you I did not know he was coming. I had no idea it was to be he. The only thing I do know is that he has a wife."

"I don't think it was fair in Mr Smith to bring a man of that stamp to any one's house without warning. Of course we are not like great folks. Did you see the shudder he gave at the singed pudding?"

"Oh, Carry, that reminds me. You must speak to the cook about that pudding. It was horrible, and Mr Smith would eat it."

"Why did you not stop him?"

"He had got it on his plate before it was discovered, and then he persisted in finishing it."

"I can't think what made her do it, I am sure," said Carry. "Stupid woman! The rest was all so nice. If only Mr Smith had had the sense not to break it, the singed smell never would have come out. It was close to me all the time, and I had a suspicion there was something nasty. It was very faint, and no one else would have known. What made him take pudding at all? He should have taken jelly, if he took anything. Very few men touch sweet things at luncheon."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter; everything else was good. Nothing could have passed off better. And now I wonder what he will go and say of us at the Castle!"

"I don't believe he will mention us."

"And I believe he will, the first thing."

CHAPTER XII.

I THOUGHT IT WOULD NEVER END!

HELEN was right. Sir George did mention them, and very nearly, if not quite the first thing.

He declined luncheon on the ground of having had luncheon. They had just come from having it with some pretty neighbours of theirs; and then, before he could say the name, Lord Sauffrenden's face showed that he at least had divined it.

There was silence directly it was spoken, and the inevitable guilty Tolleton air stole over several of the company. On Philip Wellwood, who was having a day's shooting at the Castle, and on the host himself, it was most visible, but a shadow of it tainted even Mr Smith. Sir George Lorrimer and Lady Sauffrenden alone were unmoved.

Sir George went on with all the unreservedness of a stranger. "What a handsome girl the eldest is! She is the eldest, is she not—or are there others?"

How busy Lord Sauffrenden was feeding Gyp, and how

suddenly Captain Wellwood became interested in the spring of his powder-flask! Mr Smith, to whom the question had not been put, was obliged to take it as if it had.

There were no signs of any sort of reply to be got from the little autocrat who held them all in check, and whose head merely reared in the faintest possible manner backwards, to show that, had she done as she liked, she would have tossed it. How should she know if there were three Miss Tolletons, or three hundred? It was a subject to which she had never given a thought. Thus much she would have said, if she had said anything. As it was, she merely looked the questioner full in the face, and then turned her long neck slowly towards Mr Smith. The inquiry could not possibly have been meant for her.

Mr Smith was thus obliged to receive it. His answer was, "No, I never heard of any."

"I suppose you see a great deal of them?" Sir George addressed her pointedly. "They must be your nearest neighbours, unless you are unusually well off."

"Yes—no; there are none nearer. But really we are very independent of other people. We don't see much of anybody. Sauffrenden and I are a very humdrum couple."

"Yes, indeed," he corroborated, eagerly. "We are often weeks without anything going on at all. You must come down and wake us up, Lorrimer. Mr Smith will think us a dreadfully slow set of folks."

They were now, he thought, off the Tolleton quicksands.

"I have not seen much slowness as yet," said Sir George. "I should not say slowness prevailed in the house we were at to-day, eh, Smith?"

Mr Smith smiled his assent.

"The pretty one had plenty to say for herself, hadn't she? You and she were great friends."

Cruel man! How thoroughly he enjoyed saying it!

"Which do you call the pretty one?" said Captain Wellwood, carelessly. "They all set up to be that, you know."

"No, do they? I hardly looked at the others. By-and-by, perhaps, they may be, but they are barely fledged yet."

"Oh, indeed they are. The second, at least, was out before I was married," said Sauffrenden, with a look at his wife, meant to convey, "There, you see, *I* don't stick up for them."

"You are not a very old married man yet, Sauffrenden; but to be out at all, they certainly are young looking. Sweet seventeen, I should have guessed them. You don't consider *them* beauties?" to Lady Sauffrenden.

"I hardly know them by sight, only by passing them sometimes when I am driving." "Haughty little sinner!" thought Sir George. "As jealous as she can be, and puts on these airs to hide it. They become her, too. She never looked better."

"Well, but Miss Tolleton? You must have met Miss Tolleton? Won't you allow her something, Lady Sauffrenden? I assure you I was quite subjugated, and as for Smith, there was no spirit left in him."

Every one looked at Mr Smith now. Sauffrenden and Philip were unable to keep their eyes off him, and even the lady stole a glance of inquiry.

Unconscious of all, he answered laughing, "Really, Lorrimer, if that is to be the way, I must be careful how I take you there again. I had no idea you were made of such inflammable matter."

"Inflammable? To be sure I am. So inflammable, that at one-and-twenty I was set on fire and devastated like the prairies, to make me safe ever afterwards. I'm perfectly harmless now. But you, you would burn like a tinder-box."

"I have been a long time about it, then."

"Getting drier and drier, just like the prairies. How the fire will rage when once the match is struck! What do you think, Lady Sauffrenden? Is it not rather dangerous for this good friend of mine to have planted his wigwam so near, so very near, to a certain pair of bright eyes?"

"That, I think, may be left to himself," replied she, trying to speak with moderation. "At least," she added, turning to him with a sweet, sudden smile, "*we* shall be at no pains to send him further away."

"That was well done, and she is good to him at all events," thought Sir George. "But I must make one more shot."

Aloud: "Well, then, I suppose he is to be left to his fate, for better for worse! But," to his hostess again, "the fair Helen appears to be no friend of yours?"

"I should be sorry to say she was."

"Indeed? Now I should have thought you were cut

out for each other. Two such charming people ought to be seen together, if only for the benefit of others."

"But I am not charming, Sir George, and I know nothing of Miss Tolleton's charms. Pray let us be content to keep apart."

The little lady snapped the thread in her netting-needle as she spoke. Her husband hastened to mediate.

"Seriously, Milly, this is nothing to laugh about. We shall begin to suspect Sir George's devastation, if he goes on at this rate. I shall send Lady Lorrimer a telegram in private. Helen is a dangerous girl."

"She is, indeed," emphatically.

("Oh, confound it! What will Smith think?") "It won't do, you see, Lorrimer. They hate each other like poison, those two. They would never assimilate if they lived a hundred years."

Lady Sauffrenden burnt with indignation. Hate each other! Such a way of putting it! Each other! As if they were exactly equal. What a shame it was of Sauffrenden! How could he say such a thing, knowing all the time, as well as possible, how it was? She lost her head and her temper now, and spoke unadvisedly.

"I really don't know what you can possibly mean, Sauffrenden. As to hating—I have never spoken to Miss Tolleton in my life; I never wish to speak to her. I do not like what I hear of them, and I don't choose to know them, and that is all." Hating! It was too ridiculous; letting her down before these men like that. She could have boxed her husband's ears.

"Heyday! Milly! 'Pon my word, you take high ground, my little woman. But I daresay Miss Tolleton feels the same. Eh, Philip? Confess now, you know them—isn't it so?"

("Smith will be furious if she goes on like this. It is enough to make him cut us dead.")

Philip would not allow he had ever heard Miss Tolleton speak of Lady Sauffrenden at all. Except—yes, once lately to ask after her health. "Have you been ill?" inquired Sir George.

"No, thank you, I have been quite well. I am very much obliged to Miss Tolleton."

"There he goes?" groaned her husband inwardly, as the

merciless baronet still pursued the subject. "Why can't he take the hint? Thick-headed idiot!"

"Then, my dear Lady Sauffrenden, you are the very person to keep watch over my friend here. He is not to be trusted; indeed he is not, I assure you. You and Sauffrenden——"

"No, no, not I, Sir George," interposed he, with a quick short laugh; "I will have nothing to do with it. For my part, I am a great admirer of the fair Helen. I beg to decline the office."

Lady Sauffrenden lifted her eyes in astonishment. She had seldom seen her husband so angry in her life. What could so suddenly have roused him?

"Oh, you are, are you?" said Sir George. "Then here is Captain Wellwood."

"Most happy," said Philip, indifferently; "anything to please. Mr Smith, suppose we go there to-morrow?"

So they were all against her—even Philip now. Her husband defiant, Sir George contemptuous, Philip setting her at nought, and Mr Smith gravely displeased. Her heart swelled at the thought. Had she not had cause to be indignant? Was not she the one aggrieved? Everybody, by turns, had tried to vex her, and then, when she was stung into saying more than perhaps she should, they took advantage of it. To think she was jealous! Jealous of that girl! Had she ever denied her beauty? She had never once given any one the slightest grounds for supposing she denied it. She was pretty, of course—she was exceedingly pretty; it would be absurd to call her anything else. But that did not make her nice; and certainly it did not make her a fit companion for her.

And then for Sauffrenden to go and say he was a great admirer, just as if he went and flirted with her—he who had never spoken to any one of them in his life. He must have been reckless when he said it. It was such a story too. But then she remembered his angry laugh, and wondered what had caused it. If she could only see him alone.

But for this she had to wait. They went out and she was left by herself. Wearily the afternoon passed, and the tea-tray waited till the tea was cold, ere they came in.

"I have ordered the pony-carriage, Milly," said her hus-

band; "and, if you like, I thought you might drive Mr Smith and Sir George back. Phil and I are just going out for another hour, so I won't wait."

She looked at him yearningly. He came up and kissed her, and put his hand on her shoulder. They all seemed in better spirits. She alone had had nothing to cheer hers.

"Go and put on your things, dear."

"Can I pick you up anywhere, Sauffrenden?"

"No, no, never mind us. At least you might come to the Hislops' cottage about half-past five—but it will be too late for you to be out then, I daresay. However, come if you like, but don't wait for us."

Wait she would, however, if it were an hour.

The two sportsmen hurried out. The light was too precious to be wasted, and they were not allowed to be ceremonious.

"Well, Philip? Eh? Well?" cried Sauffrenden, as soon they were alone. "What did you think of that for a scene? Ha! ha! ha! I can laugh at it now, but it was *dreadful*, wasn't it? I could have sunk into the very earth for shame! That fool Lorrimer! And my wife making it worse every time she opened her lips! I thought it would never end! I thought we should never get off without a regular blow-up! I did not know which way to look."

"Or whether to laugh or to cry."

"No, hang it! I never felt less like laughing in my life!"

"And then you appealed to me."

"My dear fellow, I would have appealed to—well, we won't say who, himself! I never was in such a strait! There was Milly, on the one hand, with her solemn face, and Lorrimer thinking it was all a joke, and Smith looking from one to the other; but he is enlightened as to one thing now, at all events. He is no longer in ignorance of Lady Sauffrenden's feelings on the subject. I mean to speak to Milly. I was disgusted at that part of it. It's enough to put him off."

"He must not be much worth, if it is."

"Oh I don't know." Lord Sauffrenden naturally regarded his wife's favour as of great importance. "Nobody could like it. And Lorrimer all unsuspecting."

"Do you think he was so unsuspecting?"

"If he was not, it was a shabby thing to do. But no,

Smith is his friend, and he would not wish to hurt him. Smith is a fellow nobody would wish to annoy. He could hardly have guessed anything."

"It struck me he kept to the subject rather closely."

"Oh, he wanted to find out. I daresay he had heard we weren't on intimate terms."

"But it was not you, it was Smith he stuck to."

"Do you think it was? If that were the way—I really should not wonder if it were. He thinks it a bad look-out for his friend, and wanted us to put him off. If that was it, Milly was playing into his hands. If that explains it, you must have been sharper than I, for it never once occurred to me."

"It's only a guess; but they had just been there together, and on one side, at least, there is no secret made. Yes, hers of course. She seems rather to enjoy having spectators, and Sir George is by no means asleep, even when he closes his eyes."

"If that is the case," said Sauffrenden, with honest heat, "he may just get some one else to sound his alarm-bell. Asking me to keep watch, indeed! What business is it of his? The poor girl must marry some one, and I don't think she could do better. As for him, though he is well enough, he's not everybody's bargain, you know. For my part, I don't see anything against the match; and any way I'm not going to be the one to put my foot in it."

"The thing is," said Philip, thoughtfully, "whether he means anything or not?"

"Who? Lorrimer?"

"No, Smith. As yet I cannot see that he has made any great advances, and he was certainly as cool as a cucumber to-day."

"Why, you don't expect a man at his time of life to turn red and white at every word. He may not be exactly ardent, but I think he has made up his mind to it. You said yourself that Lorrimer had fished it out."

"Yes, but——" Philip hesitating. "I was thinking of her purpose, not his."

"Oh, then, you think she proposes to—to make him propose, in short?"

"I think she does. And then whether she accepts him, or not, will be another thing."

"Good gracious! you don't mean to say he is to be thrown overboard? If I thought that——"

"I never said so, Sauffrenden," laughing. "You are in too great a hurry. I think the chances are ten to one that she will accept him."

"Well, that's all I want," replied his friend pacified. "If she does that it's all she can do. And I won't have her interfered with. I shall speak seriously to Milly; and as for Lorrimer, he must be prevented putting his oar in. There's Hislop. Don't forget to be at the cottage at half-past five, and we can give you a lift. Ta, ta!"

Lord Sauffrenden was highly delighted with his new toy, and his new toy was the combination of Mr Smith and the Tolletons.

It was necessary, however, to hide his delight, and speak to Milly, as he said, seriously.

He began by telling her that he was very ill-pleased, and that she had been very rude, and pulled such a long face as she drove him home in the pony-carriage, that, weary and unhappy as she had been beforehand, she was soon utterly subdued.

He had met her a mile on the other side of the cottage for the special purpose of administering this conjugal lecture alone.

Whether anything came of it or not, he would not have Mr Smith annoyed in his house. Mr Smith had just taken Sir George Lorrimer to Freelands, and then she must needs inform them both that the Tolletons were not good enough for her! He really wondered how a woman who prided herself upon her behaviour, could have been so ill-bred and disagreeable. Helen Tolleton had never done her any harm, and he would not have it said all over the country that his wife was jealous of her looks.

Of course that was what they all thought. She might have seen Sir George was only amusing himself at her expense.

In all his life Sauffrenden had never said so many cutting things.

Milly could scarcely bear them. She was so unaccustomed to rebuke; so accustomed to love, admiration, and a little subjection. She hardly knew what to make of this. Tears of mortification rose to her eyes as she made her defence,

How could Sir George think so? How could any of them? Sauffrenden knew it was not true. And it was he who had put it into their heads, saying she and Miss Tolleton hated each other.

Sauffrenden retained the upper hand. He had had to say something. He was so put out he hardly knew what to say. It was the best face he could put on the matter. He had often told her that that little tongue of hers would get her into mischief, and so it had. She must pay for it now.

Milly said petulantly that she had nothing to pay for.

He went on. "You ought to have let the subject drop——"

"So I did. It was he, Sir George, who would go on with it. I let it drop every time. How can you be so unjust, Sauffrenden?"

"I was so vexed about Smith."

"What about Mr Smith? What has he to do with the Tolletons? I don't understand what it is all about. Sir George was only laughing at him."

"Sir George might be laughing, but *he* was not. It is as well you should know that he admires Helen——"

"Oh, indeed he does not, Sauffrenden. He was only carrying on the joke; and I daresay he likes to be laughed at in that way a little, because he is getting old."

"Nonsense; it was nothing of the kind. If it was, why could you not carry on the joke too?"

"I thought those girls might be making a set at him, and it would be a kindness to warn him."

"I tell you, dear, I will not have you going about warning people in this way. You forget you are only a young pretty woman too, and take to yourself all the scolding airs of an old dowager."

"I am sorry," said she, softened still more by the little compliment than by the rebuke.

"Well, don't do it again, that's all I have to say. And if there ever should be anything between Smith and the Tolletons, don't you take any notice; it's not your place."

She longed to say it was her place—longed to repudiate the idea of there ever being anything between Mr Smith and the Tolletons—but prudence and love prevailed. Sauffrenden had been really vexed; therefore she said nothing.

"Now, mind!"

"Yes, dear."

"Give me a kiss, then, and I'll forgive you. Woa! look out for the powder-flask; you ran it right into me! There's Phil; I told him to be at the cottage. All right Phi—lip! Hey! come to the cor—ner, and we needn't go all the way u—up!"

And so well had he done his work, and so timely had been the chastisement, that he might have conversed on the forbidden subjects for fully a week afterwards, and never once needed to call them *the T's*.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHRISTMAS FEAST.

"I AM in a strait, and have come to see who will help me out of it," said Mr Smith, entering the drawing-room at Freelands one afternoon. "I wish to give my work-people a Christmas treat, and have no idea how. Most of them are married men with families; and I mean to have the wives, and children too. We can find room for all, and, I hope, entertainment; if one only knew how to begin. You," turning to Miss Tolleton, "can help me, I am sure."

"If I can, you may be certain I will," replied Helen. "What is the first difficulty—the invitations?"

"No, I think I can manage the invitations. I have a list of names here, and will go round and ask them myself. But the truth is, I am so lamentably ignorant, I really don't know what to ask them to. Is it dinner, tea, or supper?"

They all laughed.

"They will come to whatever it is, I fancy," said Miss Tolleton, pleasantly. "It is a meal of some sort. In their own minds they will call it dinner, tea, or supper, according to the hour. What o'clock do you think of asking them?"

"That is one of the points I wish to consult upon. The days are closing in so fast now, it would be useless to attempt

anything out of doors. Perhaps if we could arrange a magic-lantern, and some fireworks."

"Nothing could be better. Then it will be in the evening; they are sure to like that."

"You think they will? And if the meal—the dinner, tea, or supper—were about six o'clock, would that do?"

"Very well indeed, I should think. They will have got their work over for the day, and have time to get tidy, and give themselves up to enjoyment," said Miss Tolleton, by way of showing her insight into the lives of cottagers.

"Then we must fix on the day. What day are you disengaged for? I depend upon your all coming to help, remember."

"Yes, of course; we shall be delighted. But any day will suit us. Had you not better refer it to some of your other 'helps'?" adroitly.

"Miss Grey! but she is not likely to do me much good. I hardly could ask Miss Fulton to come so far. Mr and Mrs Hardwicke will, however, I think."

Helen turned up her nose at Mr and Mrs Hardwicke. Village people! She had hoped for the Sauffrendens.

"And let me see," pursued he, "there are the two Miss Bains. Mrs Rodney would have given us great assistance; but I fear she will hardly be well enough. We must have Mr Rodney, however."

Mr Rodney, the curate, has been once or twice named in these pages. He was a smooth-faced, long-necked young man, with a bubble in his throat. Worse than that could not be said against him. He was much beloved in the parish, on account of his tender-heartedness. More than once in his bachelor days he had been known to carry his own dinner to some poor house, where it is certain he never ate it; and he was constantly seen in new clothes, for the simple reason that he had given away his old ones.

When he married, this state of things could not, of course, go on. His own dinner he must eat, and his old clothes were well mended; but the joy of giving was not debarred him. He was still to be seen carrying the well-known tin pot, and his hand went to his pocket as readily as before.

Mrs Rodney was all that was good, kind, and worthy of her husband, but at present she was not available for gaieties, having just recovered from a long illness. How-

ever, there was her sister, and Helen reminded Mr Smith of Miss Clay. She had seen her in church, and thought her privately a dull-looking girl—nothing more or less. She would do for this occasion admirably.

Mr Smith was glad to hear of the addition, and promised to call on Mr Rodney, and engage his and Miss Clay's attendance without delay.

"Then there are the Miss Hunts," said he; "perhaps Mrs Hunt? Do you think——"

"Oh yes, with the greatest pleasure; she would be quite hurt if you left her out. Dr Hunt, too, would come, if you asked him, I daresay. Why, Mr Smith, you don't know how much we shall all enjoy it. And now, is there anything we can do? Are there any preparations to be made?"

No, it appeared the preparations could be made by others. The fireworks could be ordered by one friend, and the magic-lantern given in charge to another. His old housekeeper was equal to undertaking the provision department. The help he really wanted was on the day. He wished to be certain of their presence.

This was assured him. They were as anxious to come as he could be to have them. As to fixing the day, they would not hear of it; they might be depended on for any day. Some one else must do that—Mr Rodney, for instance. He had engagements; they had none.

Helen was inflexible on this point. She felt that the presence of the mild curate would impart a dignity to the scene which it might otherwise lack. It would be right and proper, and well for all parties, that he should be there.

In this way they could also become acquainted with Miss Clay. Since Mrs Rodney had had her sister with her, the Miss Tolletons had called more than once, but Miss Clay had not chosen to take their cards as left on her. She had never come to Freelands, and had once or twice turned into a shop if she saw any of the party coming. It did not look as if she wished for their acquaintance.

The curate and his wife were themselves politely civil to the Tolletons. It is true they managed with wonderful dexterity to evade their numerous invitations, and that Mrs Rodney blushed uncomfortably if accosted by them

in public. But neither she nor her husband failed in maintaining relations of quiet distant courtesy; and they walked steadily into the Freelands avenue, even if they did glance down the road before doing so.

"They cannot harm us," Mrs Rodney said, "but Sarah had better not go."

And so the Miss Tolletons had not been introduced to Miss Clay. This was the reason why Helen was anxious she should be asked to the Hill. To such a gathering they could hardly help taking her. If Mr Smith would allow them to fix the day, they were secured.

Mr Smith being equally desirous of their company, this was soon arranged, and he promised as soon as possible to let the ladies know the result of his application.

Would Mr Tolleton come? was the next suggestion. He had not liked to make it before—had not felt sure that he would care to leave his comfortable fireside; but if he would——. They were sure he would—he would be quite melancholy if left behind. He might be depended on.

"I hope the Miss Hunts will be able to come too," Mr Smith reverted to them, good-naturedly. He hoped every one would be able to come. He felt a glow of spirits and happy anticipations that must have vent. He was ready for anything.

"They are at home to-day, I know; at least Mrs Hunt is," said Helen, softly.

"Perhaps I might look in on them after calling on the Rodneys," replied he, quick to catch the hint. "That is, if I may depend on its being all one to you?"

"Don't think of us at all; count upon us. We are not going out at all, you know, and are perfectly free. We would not miss this for the world. When you have arranged it with the others, you will come and let us know, will you not?"

But why had he not asked the Sauffrendens? It would have been such a chance, such an opportunity. Even if *she* could not have been compassed, Lord Sauffrenden must have fallen a prey. Helen would have been so quiet, so demure, so sweetly, gravely beautiful, that she would have taken them by storm. For the first time she felt a little cross with Mr Smith.

Mr Rodney fixed the following Thursday. There was service on Wednesday evenings, and he had a meeting on Friday; but his own little reading on Thursday he could easily put off. He would be glad, really glad to do it. It was so seldom that husbands and wives were permitted to share in the same treat, that he was doubly pleased that it was to be so in the present instance.

He always felt a man wasn't half a man without his wife; and here he coloured, and looked as if it had suddenly dawned upon him, that this was not exactly the remark he ought to have made, to one who could not be expected to sympathise in the sentiment.

Mr Smith, however, with the most happy unconsciousness, concurred heartily, and all was right.

Mr Rodney being thus secured, and Miss Clay likewise, he bent his steps to the doctor's house.

It was the same story here. Of course they would come. Mrs Hunt would quite have scolded him if they had not been asked; she really thought she should have invited herself. For the doctor she could not so readily promise, but she thought he might be looked for at any rate some time in the course of the evening. The dear girls would be only too happy to assist. Maria was the very person for anything of this kind. So fond of the poor, and always fussing about them. How delighted she would be, to be sure!

Was there anything special required of her? She could answer for its being done, and well done; although perhaps, as her mother, she had no business to say so.

Mr Smith confessed that there was nothing in particular required at Miss Hunt's hands. He would count, however, on her kindness when the day came. The young ladies would all be needed to take charge of the tea department, and perhaps Miss Hunt would kindly preside at one of the tables. He proposed to place a lady at the head of each tea-table, Miss Clay taking Mrs Rodney's place at the principal one.

Miss Clay? That was all very well; very proper and suitable. A silent girl with a mole on her left cheek. She would make tea admirably, and never speak to Mr Smith.

Great was her triumph.

"Girls, girls, who do you think has been here? Mr

Smith. What a pity you were out? But what do you think he came for? You'll never guess, I can tell you. A grand ploy up at the Hill, and we are all to go and help. What do you think of that? Ah! the Tolletons thought they would get him to give a ball, did they? I should like to see them do it. They will be glad enough to get their noses in along with other people now. Maria is to make tea at one of the tables, and Miss Clay at the other. Very nice and right to ask Miss Clay. She goes instead of Mrs Rodney, you know. Poor Mrs Rodney never comes in for anything nice. Now I suppose you'll want something new to wear. We must do what we can with papa."

There was no repressing her elation. She would not even animadvert on the dirty marks left by their boots on the carpet.

"Will *he* be there, do you think?" said Maria to her sister, as soon as they were up-stairs.

"I daresay."

"I almost wish he were not."

"Why?"

"Because mamma will make me stick to Mr Smith all evening."

Captain Wellwood, however, was not there, it never having entered Mr Smith's head to ask him.

Every one who had been invited came. The evening was all that could be desired, even for fireworks. Miss Clay was installed at the head of one table, and Miss Hunt led to another. Would Miss Tolleton take the third? Miss Carry Tolleton did. Helen had waived the position to her sister when Mr Smith came to make the final arrangements. She now took a seat quite in the background, busying herself among empty cups and saucers, and apparently desirous of nothing but being useful.

"Do you see how quiet Helen is?" whispered Mrs Hunt to Clare. "She is quite neglected, poor thing. Now Mr Smith, do sit down here, and rest yourself for a minute. You have been on your feet all evening. Let Maria give you a good cup of tea to refresh you."

Mr Smith, with a vivid recollection of Maria's tea, hastily declined the second proposal, though he so far acceded to the first as to occupy the vacant seat beside her for a few

minutes. Mrs Hunt's indicating finger came back to her bread-and-butter, and she looked serenely satisfied.

Not so her victim. He was restless. He did not wish to get stuck there. He ought to look after his other guests. He wondered what Miss Tolleton was doing behind the door.

Why was she, so eminently fitted to grace the front, hid in the background? He longed to go and see, but it was some time before he could. He was wanted here, he was wanted there. Was there to be more ale drawn? Was the great set piece to be in front of the drawing-room or the dining-room window? Mr Bowling had not left out a certain key. Mr Smith had to see to many things in Bowling's department. His old butler had been ill, and was getting a holiday.

When at length he did find himself behind the pantry door, a passing word was all that he could obtain.

"I am quite happy here, thank you. There is so much to be done, and it is delightful to be really of use. You have plenty of assistants in the room, and some one is needed here."

"But why should it be you?" There was a flattering emphasis on the words.

"Because I like it," with cheerful decision. "How well everything is going off! So many happy faces! Oh do go away now, you are so dreadfully in the way here!"

So laughing, she drove him off; but it was enough, his reluctance was evident.

Lily, however, was still less pleased with her sister's obscurity. "You have hardly even shown yourself in the room, and Mrs Hunt thinks she is carrying all before her."

"That is just what she ought to think, my dear."

"But you have never had a word from Mr Smith."

"Indeed I have; he has just been here, and I sent him away."

"What did you do that for?"

"Because I didn't want him—just now."

"And how does he like your shutting yourself up here?"

"Not at all. I never supposed he would. I rather intended him not to like it. You have no idea how much good this will do him."

"Well, but do you mean it to go on all evening?"

"That depends. All tea-time certainly. By-and-by, perhaps, I may better myself, as the servants say. Do you know who is going to show off the magic-lantern?"

"Yes; a Mr Bohns, a German. He has come down on purpose. I have just been talking to him,—that man with the beard. Why do you want to know?"

"I did not wish it to be Mr Smith, that was all."

Lily was swept away. More empty cups and saucers had to be deposited, and she could no longer fill up the narrow doorway.

When the time for exhibiting the magic-lantern arrived, however, she remembered what Helen had said, and looked round for her. Some project she had in her mind certainly.

But Helen was nowhere to be seen. Was it possible that she had stayed behind with those stupid cups and saucers, and never even come into the room where the show was? So it appeared. But the room was nearly dark, and she could not be certain. Her height alone must mark her coming in with the others, and there was a good deal of confusion ere all were seated.

Suddenly the light was altogether obscured, and she heard a low voice close behind her say,—"No, thank you; this will do perfectly." How in the world had she got there? She must have been one of the first to enter. But, then, how had she been unobserved? And where was the end of this retirement any more than the other? It was carrying it too far—unless, indeed——in the first flash of light which followed, she, looking round, dimly discerned her sister, and, beside her, Mr Smith.

The light was so confined to the further end of the room, that only to one already half prepared, could they have been distinguishable. Helen had shown herself all Helen again.

Great and enduring was her sister's satisfaction. There they were—the embryo lovers—safely ensconced behind all the faces, half concealed by the heavy curtain—she, barely visible, he, still deeper in the shade. When there was light in the room, every eye was on the white sheet, with its startling, curious, and comic apparitions. In the dark intervals, all was buzz and bustle; every tongue wagging, and no ear intent on what might be going on so close at hand, that it must be innocent.

That the rest of the company believed their host to be engaged among the exhibitors, was evident.

Mrs Hunt still retained her illuminated face; and Mr Rodney made complimentary remarks, loud enough for those on the other side of the screen to hear.

Long and loud was the applause which greeted each succeeding scene. The rustics, well plied with good cheer —ale and porter — (tea had been only for their wives) elbowed each other for the front. Joan forgot her awe of Madam, and laid a hand upon her knee. Miss Clay allowed herself to be leant upon, knelt upon, kneaded into shape, pressed and dirtied by a crew of confiding little ones. Dr Hunt, attempting to make his way through the throng at the door, was fairly told he must remain where he was.

He had the sense to take the prohibition in good part. The men knew him, and he them. To-morrow they would recognise all his title to observance; but this was their night—this was their entertainment—they were equal to anything and anybody. He understood the case, and gave in with good-humour. A sight of his wife's face, and a reassuring nod from her, further helped his patience.

She was seated in the front row, Maria by her side; and the nod was intended to let him know that all was right in that quarter. It was not till afterwards, however, that she could whisper,—

"Oh, my dear, I wish you had been here! The tea was really magnificent, and Maria quite—Mr Smith was at her table constantly. I don't think he sat down by Miss Clay once."

Meantime, Helen had not forgotten her intention of making Miss Clay's acquaintance. When the magic-lantern display was over, the first thing Lily saw was her sister—emerged from her corner, no one could tell how—in the act of bowing to Miss Clay—Mr Smith having just introduced them.

Miss Clay was looking a little uncomfortable, and assenting shyly to Miss Tolleton's graceful nothings. Immediately after, Mr Smith was seized on by the German, desirous of explaining some mistake in the programme, and no one ever discovered that they had not been together during the whole exhibition.

Everybody was now eager to get out of doors.

"Such a night for fireworks," Mr Tolleton observed repeatedly, he did not remember to have seen since the last night he had had the good fortune to see fireworks. To this he received different replies. Some had never seen really good fireworks in their lives. Some had had fireworks themselves, now and then, in a small way. Some had never seen fireworks without rain; and some never but in favourable weather. Each had his own experience to give, and no one listened to that of his neighbour.

Mrs Hunt hoped that Mr Smith was not thinking of letting off any of the fireworks himself. She was sure it was too cold a night for him to be walking about on the wet grass. There were plenty of others whom it would do no harm to. He had much better stay quietly with the ladies in the drawing-room. For her part, she meant to get into the bow-window, where she was sure she should see everything that there was to be seen. She then summoned Maria; but to her amazement, to her almost unbelieving satisfaction, Maria declined to come. She was going out with Mr Smith to inspect some of the pieces. Mr Smith had asked her; the others were going, too, and they had all got galoshes.

Mrs Hunt said not another word about the wet grass.

The party set out. Helen and Miss Clay first; the younger Miss Tolletons, one on each side of the resigned curate; Clare Hunt, her father, and several waifs and strays of young men, all in a bunch; and Mr Smith—oh happy moment!—Mr Smith and Maria last of all.

Mrs Hunt saw them file past—saw Helen leading the way with the shy stranger girl, and her sisters hemming in the curate, and felt a contemptuous pity for their fate.

"They were obliged to take up with the Rodney set, you know," said she, afterwards.

Her present observations, however, had to be for Miss Bain—that Miss Bain whom Helen Tolleton had selected as a suitable wife for Mr Smith, when he first came amongst them.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MISS BAINS.

THE Miss Bains, for there were two of them, were spinsters of a certain age, who, to use the hackneyed phrase, had seen better days.

This, at least, they constantly affirmed themselves. They lived in a small hot house in Eastworld, whose dingy rooms, with their low ceilings and unopened windows, had a faint pervading smell as of gas escaping.

They kept a large, lean dog, without whose attendance they seldom walked out, and who was supposed to find his meals in this way. No one, at least, had ever seen him fed otherwise. Their tables, chairs, and mantelpieces were encumbered with relics; and heirlooms of strangely little value were to be found in plenty. Their money appeared to be scarce; but they had all the remembrance of it.

In their appearance the sisters harmonised equally little with the usual ideas of clean, tidy, trim, old-maidenhood. When caught in their morning attire, they were slovens, whom one felt ought hardly to be looked at. When dressed for company, they presented a fantastic mixture of grandeur and disease. Everything they wore was magnificent, but smitten. Their gowns were grease-stained and frayed; their silk stockings had holes; their laces were crumpled; and their jewels chiefly consisted of settings without stones.

They had come to the feast in all these decayed splendours, and were now sitting in the bow-window, listening while Mrs Hunt descanted on Mr Smith.

"Such a host as he makes, does he not, Miss Lydia? So thoughtful for everybody? Such preparations! Fires in all the rooms, and no stint of anything! Do you know, I really believe there is a cold supper laid out in the library! The man went in with a trayful of glasses as we came past the door; and I just caught sight of it through the opening—jellies, turkey, and all!"

"You don't say so, Mrs Hunt? Well, that really is too much. Dear me! I thought we had done very well, as it

was. Maria gave me two cups of excellent tea, and Mr Smith himself made me taste the pudding. I can't say but what I was glad to get a bittie, for you know we dine early. And then, as we didn't know exactly what to expect, we just took a snatch, instead of our regular meal, meaning to wait and see. If there hadn't been anything else, you know, we could have done uncommonly well; but if there had, it would have been a pity to spoil it. And really when I got the pudding I needed nothing extra. Dear me, a supper! This is really treating us like princes!"

"Bachelors are always the best of entertainers," rejoined the doctor's wife. "If he goes on like this, we shall all get so selfish we shan't want him ever to change his state, I'm afraid."

"No, that we shan't!" cried the other little old lady, with some eagerness. (People should have no handle for suspecting her and Lyddy of opposite desires.) "We shall not indeed. He is a deal better as he is. Dear me! We shouldn't have been half as comfortable here to-night if there had been a lady presiding."

"That depends, of course, on who the lady was," rejoined Mrs Hunt, a little shortly. "To be sure, if Mr Smith ever does take it into his head to marry, and he's just at the age when many a man does, he would have every right to be particular."

"Oh, but I should say he was far too comfortable," put in Miss Lyddy. "Not but what I have heard a lady spoken of." (Mrs Hunt's heart gave a great throb.) "And one who would well become the position too. A grand lady of the Hill she would make. But dear! I say, if there had been anything in it, for certain she would have been here to-night. Is it likely she would not have come, or that he would have neglected to ask her? No, no; there's no truth in that tale, we may depend upon it."

"You're mysterious, Miss Lydia," said the doctor's wife, with a little quivering laugh. "Pray let us first hear what the tale is. It has never reached my ears, I can tell you. I thought we had ladies enough here to-night. There is hardly one left in Eastworld, with the exception of poor Mrs Rodney, who is always out of luck when there's anything going on."

"Very true. Poor thing, so she is! But as for the other, she's not an Eastworld lady yet, Mrs Hunt, though maybe we shall see her one some of these days. It's best not to name names. Who's in that window?" in a loud voice. "Anybody there?"

No voice responding, she resumed her confidential whisper.

"It's best to be cautious when one can't see round the room. I got into such a pucker once through neglecting that, it has been a lesson to me ever since. 'Melia and I were staying with Jane Bond. Jane is our father's cousin, you know, on the English side, so of course we keep up the connection. Well, you know Jane's house. It's all queer twists and corners and holes in the wall. One never feels safe in it, at least I'm sure I never do, now. This was the story. One day when we had been there about a week, I went into the parlour, and seeing, as I thought, only 'Melia sitting by the table; 'Melia,' says I, 'I do think that beard of Jane's is growing. It's as big as many a lad's that calls for shaving water.' And 'Melia she gave such a cough, and looked at me, and there was Jane in the window! Well, you know, I might have said worse. And very thankful I felt I hadn't gone on longer. But, for all that, I've never been asked there since, although Jane made believe she didn't mind, and we got over it as well as we could at the time. But it has just made me careful ever since, how I name names in a room one can't see all round at once. Who's there?" diving her head forward beyond the curtain, and listening.

As the silence was unbroken, the other sister took up the narrative.

"Jane has never been quite the same to us since. She thinks we don't observe, but for all she sends us bits of letters, and a goose at Christmas, there's a difference. It might have been fancy, but we thought we had never eaten a goose as hard as we got last year. Perhaps there won't be one at all this. That would be a fine story. We have had our regular goose every Christmas these ten years. But no doubt it was a foolish thing of Lyddy to do, and she's sensible of it. The last time we asked Jane here, she took the invitation very high, and showed she had no will to come."

"People often pay dear for mistakes, especially from

imprudence," said Mrs Hunt, sententiously. "One can't be careful enough. But there's nobody here for certain to-night, Miss Lydia, and I think you might just——"

"Oh dear — dear — dear me! That is magnificent! Where is it? Where is it gone?" cried Miss Lyddy, straining her neck after the first rocket. "How it made me jump! So that was the beginning, I suppose. But they'll surely not be all like that. No, no; the rest are further off, that's right. Well, I—that was perfectly—oh, Mrs Hunt, don't lose the sight! There they are! There they go! See, see! One after another! 'Melia, look! My certy! I'm thankful I'm safe indoors! What if any one should be killed! But the doctor's here, that's a comfort. There he is, too! There they all are, as plain as a pike-staff! Maria's white frock as blue as blue can be in that queer light. Oh, Mrs Hunt, do you think it's safe? Do you not think the girls would be better in the house, now that it's all begun? We can call to them, you know. I declare, I think we ought."

Mrs Hunt, however, arrested her hand.

"There's no fear, Miss Lydia; their father is with them. Make your mind easy, Mr Smith will take good care that nothing happens. Now you must really tell me what it was about Mr Smith and——"

"Whew! That was a dandy! That was a—how it made me jump! Good gracious, 'Melia, I'm all in a tremble! What do they have them so near the house for?" cried the excitable creature, as a Roman candle shot off within, as she averred, a yard of her elbow. "If I had only brought my smelling-bottle; but the last time it was used we couldn't get the cork out. What a pity it should be left behind! If any one did, you know—— This really is—— Whew! There's another! I'm sure I don't know whether—— Bless me!"

"Don't be alarmed, Lyddy," said the calmer 'Melia, whose voice was only a little tremulous; "it's startling, but not dangerous, I'm told. Look at those faces under the tree. There's old Butts and his Jemima, as pleased as possible. Poor Jemima was sadly afraid she would have to give it up to-night, her cough has been so troublesome. Such nights as she has, poor soul! But there she stands, and seems to have forgotten all about it. I

shall shake my finger at her, though. She ought to come in.

No notice was taken of the finger, which was, in fact, quite invisible to the threatened Jemima.

"Ah! she'll pay for it by-and-by," said 'Melia, with a sense of justice. "Foolish thing! she's coughing at this moment. Well, I've done all I could; she must stand on her own feet; the blame's not mine. Bless me! who is that wild-looking—why, it's our Harry! I do declare I might have guessed till midsummer! Who would have thought of Harry?"

"And there's Bullett, like a great cannibal king!" cried Lyddy, with rather a happy hit. "One would hardly know Bullett without his blue apron, if it weren't for—— Oh, look, he's holding up little Tommy, poor little soul! I didn't know Tommy was here to-night. I must really find them out afterwards. I suppose Bullett supplied the meat, 'Melia?"

"And there's Mr Smith and Maria—and the rest," added Mrs Hunt, whose eyes had all this time been wandering among the different groups in search of them. What was Jemima, or Bullett, or any one else to her, compared with these two great orbs in her heavens? She had not listened to a word of the old ladies' exclamations. "There they all are! Close at hand, now, Miss Lydia, under the great oak. There now, at your left—don't you see them, the whole party?"

"I see them; I see them now, Mrs Hunt. Dear me! how strange they do look! Maria quite picturesque. Which are the rest? Ah! there's Helen Tolleton, graceful creature! She's holding the stick. What for, I wonder? Did you ever——she was as close to it as I am to you!"

Helen had held the rocket for Mr Smith to fire; and when the display was over, she walked with him through the shrubbery back to the house. Thus much she permitted him. By her contrivance Maria had by far the greater share of his attentions. He himself did not discover this. Lily did, and it amused her. Of the others, those most interested noted it with inward rapture, the rest were otherwise engrossed.

Maria Hunt was not supposed to be a captivating girl.

All suspicion, however, was diverted from the Tolletons.

Mrs Hunt took Helen under her wing, and hoped she had not got her pretty dress spoilt; while the doctor said it was more important that she had not got her pretty throat sore.

For his part he expected to call at every house next day, after such a mad escapade. He was in such good humour, that he absolutely talked "shop."

Mr Smith had been easily managed. He was thinking chiefly of his guests and their enjoyment; a little of Miss Tolleton, and not at all of Miss Hunt. How she was so often by his side, it had not occurred to him to wonder. She was too insignificant.

But he had wondered a little—he had felt a little hurt with Helen. She appeared to be keeping out of his way. Could he have offended her? She had never been more gracious, more winning, than when they sat together in the dark corner, while the magic-lantern was going on. He had reckoned on her walking with him, and she had sped off with Miss Clay.

He had asked her to come and inspect some arrangement, and she had come, but Miss Clay was with her. Then, when he wanted some one to hold his rocket, she had stepped forward, as the rest hung back. He had thanked her gravely, and she had walked home by his side. She kept him in a perpetual ferment.

The entertainment, however, was drawing to a close. He must clear his mind from all personal thoughts. None must feel neglected or overlooked.

They were summoned to collect around the front door. The ladies assembled inside the hall, and Mr Rodney stepped forward to deliver the short address which he had prepared. It was not much of an address, but it did what was wanted. It sobered, softened the exhilarated party; and even those in whose hearts it found no ready echo, listened with respectful toleration. "Rodney, he's a good chap, and a pity he warn't rector." And then they cheered loudly, and began to move slowly off in groups, towards the village.

Little Tommy had fallen asleep, and Jemima's cough made itself heard as they went by. The whole air was impregnated with tobacco. The sides of the walks were sadly injured.

Mr Smith, however, stood with uncovered head, and serene brow, happy in the happiness he had given; nor would he allow the hall-door to be closed until the last step retreated down the avenue.

The supper which Mrs Hunt had so cleverly discovered was then announced; and the party, disencumbered of their wraps, and with smoothed hair and glowing cheeks, adjourned to the other room.

One other discovery Mrs Hunt had made. She could not have slept in her bed that night otherwise. She had forced from Miss Lyddy's lips the name of the Lady who was spoken of as the possible mistress of the Hill.

CHAPTER XV.

THE END OF THE FEAST.

"MAY I sit by you?" said Helen to Miss Clay, as the party arranged themselves round the supper-table.

There had been no formal going in—every one went as they chose. Miss Clay had taken a seat about the middle of the table, exactly underneath the chandelier. A more brilliant-looking creature than Helen Tolleton, as she emerged from the doorway, and took the chair beside her in this centre of light and radiance, could hardly have been imagined. Her pale face was lit up by the excitement and the evening air. She had come forth from her chrysalis state of obscurity and retirement, and spread her wings—the gay, triumphant butterfly.

Who but she could have taken the scarlet bouquet from her place, and inserted it so suddenly, so coquettishly, among her dark coils? Who but she kept up that fire of fun and repartee with old Bartlett the banker; turned the wretched head of the red-haired clerk; and made even the gentle curate confide afterwards in the safe, true, loving, wifely ear, which received all his secrets, that he had *admired*, though he could not *approve*?

Mr Smith was even startled.

He broke off twice in the middle of his conversation with

the banker's wife, and let a whole sentence of Mrs Hunt's fall unheeded to the ground, while he stared at Helen.

What was she doing down there? How had she the power, go as low as she would, to make that place a centre? Here again she had slid beyond his reach; and though no longer hid in a corner, though rather the cynosure of all eyes, yet not shining for him.

It made him discontented. He could see the eyes bent upon her, the listening heads, the stolen glances, returning more and more frequently. He could hear the loud applause of the older men, and note the more meaning silence of the younger. He even fancied, but this might have been merely a fancy, that a cloud, a depression, a change of some sort, had come over the faces of those who were not bowing to the goddess.

Some of his lady guests looked grave.

Mrs Hunt too had lost her animation. Although Lyddy Bain, who was a stupid creature, and one that never could see half a yard in front of her, might put no faith in the story she was herself promulgating, Mrs Hunt, who piqued herself on the accuracy of her perceptions, and more especially on the length of her vision, could not feel so easy on the subject.

She had been all her life gifted with powers of discernment. She could always tell events that were likely to take place long before any one else had dreamt of them. She knew things before people knew them themselves. In short, to listen to her, she was a prophet arisen in the later days.

The name Lyddy had whispered was that of Miss Fulton; and so much had Lyddy heard of Mr Smith's being at the Hall, and of the Admiral's attentions, and Miss Fulton's suitability, that it was poor consolation to Mrs Hunt to find that her only grounds for disbelief consisted in the lady's absence from the feast.

"If she had been here, you know, it would have been as clear as day," said she.

Now there were twenty reasons why Miss Fulton should not be there. For one thing, the Fultons gave themselves airs, and they had never yet mixed with the Eastworld people. The Tolletons alone, of all present, had their acquaintance. Mrs Hunt did not know how fast that ac-

quaintance was being withered up, under the blight of Lady Sauffrenden's frown. It was possible—more than possible—that if Miss Fulton had been invited, she had excused herself.

She was not a rival to be despised. She was only too formidable. As she looked at Maria, Maria now faded into insignificance, dull and overlooked by every one, the old feeling of dissatisfaction arose within her.

It was this, and not Helen Tolleton's shining sun-light, which caused her to look thoughtful.

Still she made a good supper. She was determined to have nothing to regret, in looking back upon that well-filled board.

She took lobster, knowing that the doctor would have frowned upon her; and turned her head the other way while her second glass of champagne was being poured out.

She would just get one word with Lyddy before they went away.

Lyddy, however, had more important things on her mind.

"Just see, Mrs Hunt, was there ever anything more tiresome? I had pinned the napkin all round, and thought it was as safe as could be. My best dress! The Macbain tartan! It's always the way whenever we put them on. If there's a spot of oil, or wine, or tea, or anything that won't come out, it always happens that it's on the Macbain tartans. I declare, I think we must just lock them by, or they'll be spoilt altogether. Eh? What did you say?" For Mrs Hunt had at length contrived to edge in her remark about Miss Fulton.

"Miss Fulton? Oh, Mrs Bartlett tells me I'm quite mistaken, and, to her certain knowledge, Miss Fulton would never look at him. There's somebody else—— Yes, indeed, Miss Clay. I do think everybody has. It would be a shame, I'm sure, if they hadn't. It's many a day since I have been at anything so grand, at any rate. 'Melia, do look here. Shall I put on cold water at once? I dabbed my handkerchief in at table, but I have not put it on yet. What do you think?"

"You had better leave it till you get home, and try benzine," recommended Mrs Hunt. "Who was the somebody else, Miss Lydia?"

"Benzine?" said Lyddy, looking round as if expecting to see it. "But I doubt that we haven't any. Besides, do you think it would be safe?"

"Perfectly safe on a good silk like that." Mrs Hunt was bent on propitiating. "But I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll bring in my bottle to-morrow morning early, and rub it in myself. If benzine won't take it out, nothing will."

It was no use trying to get anything further out of Lyddy that night; she must take her quietly next day.

By twelve o'clock supper was over, and the great business of cloaking, bonneting, hatting, going on.

Helen, the vivid rose-colour still in her cheek, came up with her sisters to make their adieux. They were the first to depart. Their host was surrounded on every side. The few frank words of thanks for their pleasant evening were spoken in the hearing of all who chose to listen.

Miss Bain's gratitude was much more humble, Mrs Hunt's infinitely more complimentary.

Mr Rodney spoke warmly on behalf of the parish; and Mr Bartlett, who had been listening to him, did his best to continue in the same strain.

All agreed that the evening had passed off to admiration. Even Bullett, the grumbling butcher, as he made out his bill for the rounds and sirloins, was won over so far as to modify his complaint into the generous desire that so deserving a gentleman should have been blest with a family.

After the feast there was a period of stagnation in the neighbourhood.

Christmas was coming, and every one was saving up for Christmas. The Sauffrendens, it is true, dined once at Fulton Hall,—Mr Smith having been asked to meet them. But Mr Smith was not there; and the Admiral, with his usual adjuration, declared he was the slipperiest eel to basket he had ever met with. Cornelia had no notion of landing him herself, and he couldn't work with another person's tackle.

The plague of it was, that all the time, he had to be so mincingly particular in what he said; for if Corny once took it into that fly-away head of hers that there was anything in the wind, she would be off like a shot.

No glimmer of his common-sense was therefore to reach her foolish mind. He must keep it close, close.

To the Sauffrendens he merely observed that their new neighbour appeared to shut himself up pretty tight; they never met him anywhere.

"That was a grand affair at his house the other day," said Lord Sauffrenden.

The Admiral pricked up his ears.

"Ah? eh? I didn't hear of it. Was it——"

"A tenant's or workman's dinner, or something of that sort. We saw the fireworks from our windows."

"Indeed! ah! very nice; ve—ry nice," condescendingly. "These kind of things, now, are just what we want. Very nice—delightful. Cornelia there, is up to her eyes in them. We must have one at the Hall—eh, Corny? Ask the Reverend about it" (by this name he was accustomed to designate his brother), "and we'll have Smith over to give us the cue."

Mr Smith, however, was again unable to swallow the tempting bait, and no more was heard of the treat at the Hall.

Mr Smith was suffering, as Mrs Hunt had said he would, from the effects of walking about on the wet grass among the fireworks.

The warmth of the rooms, with the draughts of cold air inseparable from such an occasion, had perhaps as much to do with it as the wet grass.

So, at least, the doctor said. He, like the butcher, having prognosticated no good accruing to himself from the new-comer, was, like him, agreeably surprised.

It was true that he had long since ceased to mourn over Mr Smith's bachelorhood. If Maria could only be installed mistress of the Hill, he thought he should never regret anything again. Never regret in the dark, that is to say.

He had begun to hope that this almost too fair vision might really come to pass. With his own eyes he had seen the host escorting his daughter about at the feast; and his wife had, almost with tears of joy, assured him of his attentions to her during the earlier portion of the evening. "Miss Fulton! Pah!" said she; "I don't care that for Miss Fulton! I believe it was all a cock-and-bull story of that creature, Lyddy Bain's."

"Their man rode in at the gate, as I left this morning however," said her husband, uneasily.

"Brown horse?"

"Yes, yes; I know the fellow. James Galt. I had to attend him when he broke his collar-bone. I spoke to him to-day."

"Then I tell you what, Robert; just speak a little about Maria now and then, and see how he takes it. It will be easy enough when you are up there so often."

The doctor took her advice. The result was satisfactory. The horizon again cleared.

Mr Smith showed no reluctance to enter on the subject. He even politely continued it. He admired the doctor's woollen comforter, Maria's work. One was eagerly offered him, and only declined because he had never worn one in his life. On this occasion it was earnestly recommended. After such a chill and sore throat, Dr Hunt considered that he must be wrapped up. He could not answer for the consequences if he would not wear a comforter, and indeed (laughing) he should set his daughter to work that very day. Thus beset, of course Mr Smith had yielded. The comforter was to be worn; and Mrs Hunt hurried out directly she heard of it, to buy the best double Berlin the village could supply.

"Ah, I wish she could have made a waistcoat like that Helen Tolleton sent to some one of her gentlemen," said she regretfully. "I don't know how it is, my girls' fingers are all thumbs. It is a perfect miracle Maria's knowing how to do this, even."

Maria made no difficulty about the undertaking. She had become much more reconciled to her cruel situation than she had ever thought possible.

She still declared, indeed, that it was dreadful to have it so, but it became apparent that she did not quite desire to have the dread removed. Having tasted the sweets of consequence, she could not all at once resign them. She began to think that Clare, with all her wisdom, might be mistaken sometimes.

As for herself she hated the idea, but (sagaciously) she could not shut her eyes to facts. Mr Smith had hung about her all that night; and had certainly never spoken one half as much to any of the other girls—not even to the Tolletons, not even to Helen.

"Helen kept out of his way," said Clare, bluntly.

"So did I, I'm sure; as much as ever I could. I only walked with him because I couldn't help it. Helen always shoved me back, and then got away herself. How could mamma fancy Helen would ever look at him? All the evening she was running away from him."

"How could he speak to her, then?"

"I never said he did, Clare; I know he didn't. But then I tried to get away from him too, and he followed me. I did not wish to speak to him any more than she, but I couldn't help it."

Maria, being thus convinced, set to work at her comforter, and all went smoothly in the doctor's house, with only a dim shadow in the distance looming in the shape of Miss Fulton.

At the end of a fortnight Mr Smith came down-stairs.

He had had another hurried visit from Sir George Lorrimer, with whom at this time he had business transactions. Sir George had summoned him to town, but hearing he was unwell, got his papers together, and ran down to the Hill instead.

He stayed a day or two, and when he was gone, the stagnation in the neighbourhood began to communicate itself in an alarming manner to the lonely man.

Only a fortnight before, and all had been so gay, so lively; now the life and the spirit of it was gone. A common experience in country life. Everything at a standstill. People you have been meeting three or four times a-week suddenly fall out of your path. An enchanted sleep steals over the place.

Into this sleep the neighbourhood of Eastworld fell.

Mr Smith thought often and wearily of Freelands. Why did he hear nothing of his friends there? Was he forgotten? He thought so.

But he was not. It was they who thought him remiss.

Had it only been known that Sir George Lorrimer had left, all would have been right. But they thought Sir George was there. If so, it was impossible to carry on matters. Lily indeed suggested an invitation to dinner to both gentlemen; but Helen, more wise, shook her head.

Sir George was all very well for once. The luncheon had been a success, but it would be foolish to risk more. Besides, they had no right to ask him. He might think

it officious, and it would never do if he were to express this opinion to Mr Smith.

"When he brought him here!" said Lily.

"Yes, I know it could be done. And if we had the chance of meeting him, and asking him ourselves, it might be different; but to send a note up! I don't know quite how Mr Smith would take it."

"He should not have asked to bring him here, then."

"You know, Lily, he never asked. It was we ourselves insisted on his bringing the old friend."

"Ay, the old friend," said Lily, laughing, "but not the young man. Not that sort of friend at all. You know best, Nelly. But I should be afraid if we take no notice of him for so long; he will think we are drawing back."

"Nonsense! If he does, I can soon make up for it. How stupid of papa not to find out when Sir George is going!"

"Going, my dear!" exclaimed her father, awoke from a gentle dose by the sound of "papa." "I forgot to tell you, Sir George is gone."

"Gone? When? To-day?"

"Oh dear no, some days ago. It was that stupid Jessamy's mistake. I went in on Monday to get some—stuff, and he had a long story about a gentleman who was staying at the Hill, and had been down—of course I thought he meant the minute before. So then I thought it as well not to inquire at the post-office. Indeed I was glad to get off, for I have had to go after so many people there, that they must think I know curiously little of the movements of my friends. By the way, those new people came to the Lodge yesterday. We must call at once, Helen."

"But how did you find out about Sir George?" said Helen.

She and Lily were both looking rather crestfallen. Sir George gone—what had Mr Smith been about? Gone too, perhaps.

"I met Hunt. He had just been to the Hill. Smith has had a nasty feverish attack. Cold and sore throat, and that sort of thing. Sir George had been gone some days."

The girls' faces brightened. A cold was infinitely better

than a friend. A cold could be treated for, easily. Their misgivings gave way to cheerful hope.

"Do you know," said Mr Tolleton, striking his thumbs in his waistcoat-pockets, and looking serious, "I think I ought to have called upon Sir George. It never occurred to me till too late, but I am afraid he will have taken it amiss. What do you think, Helen?"

"Oh, nonsense, papa!" replied Helen, not very respectfully. "Sir George must have been here only two days, and how were we to be supposed to know he was here at all? If it had been a longer visit!"

"Well, but the time before. The time he came to luncheon."

"He left almost directly. I found out that for you. I meant you to have called if he had only stayed three days. But I don't think we want him. The thing is now, what can we do for Mr Smith?"

Mr Tolleton looked astonished at this trifling way of dismissing a grave business. Sir George Lorrimer had been neglected. He had not been called upon. It was the girls who were to blame. Why had he not been packed off with his cards, and the inevitable note in his pocket? They ought to have seen to it, and now they did not care. Helen had called it "nonsense."

Helen was deep in thought. "Could you not lend him books?"

"Who? Mr Smith? My dear, he has a fine library. What books could I take him that he has not got already?"

"He might consider it an attention."

"Pay him attention in some other way. There are plenty of things he would rather have than books," said Mr Tolleton, judging by himself. "Go up and see him."

"PAPA! But you can go."

"Ay, I knew it would be that. A nasty new avenue, too, that spoils all my boots. Well, I suppose I must, though he won't thank me for coming, much. Can't you come with me, Helen?"

"No, indeed, papa, it would never do."

"Why not? We could go by the plantation and the short cut, and nobody be the wiser."

"Mr Smith would."

"Well, he would be delighted."

"I daresay he might, but all the same——" Then she stopped to consider. "If I felt sure he would not think it improper, I should like to go very much."

"Improper! What an idea!" cried Lily. "Helen playing propriety?"

"You never will see," retorted Helen, angrily, "that it is not I. I don't care two straws about those things myself, I'm not such a prig. But I certainly do not wish to take all the trouble of going up to see Mr Smith, if it is only to go down in his opinion."

Then she thought of her walk to the view. To go up, under her father's wing, and pay Mr Smith a visit as an invalid, and an old gentleman, was not, she well knew, half as improper in reality as their taking a private walk together by appointment.

But there was something in going to the *house*. There was something in facing the servants, in walking past the windows. She gave to every consideration its due weight.

"If I do go——" she began.

"Go? Yes, by all means," interrupted her sister. "Go, and suggest tolu and paregoric, and all the rest of it. Go, and be as charming as ever you can. Now is your time. You will do him more good than all the medicines in Dr Hunt's medicine-chest. I would go too, only I think it might look more affectionate your going alone."

Helen looked dubious. She did not care for its looking so very affectionate, but neither did she wish for her sister's company. She liked to have Mr Smith all to herself.

"Well, will you come?" inquired her father.

"I think I will. It is not as if he could think himself a young man. And we can go, as you say, by the plantation. We might merely ask how he is, you know; and if we are asked in, you might go, and leave me outside, or something of that sort. If he is sitting in the drawing-room, he will see us pass, and know I am there. Then if he asks me to go in, I could do it. After all, I think I will go."

CHAPTER XVI.

I ONLY HOPE IT WILL GO ON SNOWING.

A WEARY man sat wearily by his dull fireside. He had seen no one all day except the doctor, who had called early, and stayed rather a shorter time than usual. He had read, and written, and arranged papers, and taken a nap, and looked at the clock, times without number, and still the unyielding hands pointed only to the hour of four.

It was the darkest, dreariest, weariest December day. A day on which everything seemed monotonous; a great round of stupidity. Meal-times were the only breaks, and they filled up again all too soon. Spun out to their fullest length, they averaged half an hour each, and what was half an hour? A mere drop in that great bucket of time—that hopeless, woeful day.

Four o'clock! It was vain to look for any change. He must wait from four till five, and from five till six, and from six till—no, he would have dinner half an hour sooner; he really could not drag on till seven.

His hand was on the bell, but it was arrested; another bell pealed through the house.

Vain as he had declared it to look for change, vain to hope that any kind wind would blow a waif of Fortune to his door, he at once jumped to the happiest conclusion—"Visitors!"

The next step was to poke the fire into a blaze, to push the chairs into order, and then to wait nervously for what might be to follow.

What if it were nothing after all? A mistake. The wrong house. A tradesman's bill. A——

"Mr and Miss Tolleton!" announces the footman, in a loud cheerful voice, and Mr Smith's highest hopes are fulfilled. Nay, he had never dared to hope for this.

"My daughter would hardly come in," began Mr Tolleton, starting on his lesson with the precipitation of one who has learnt it in a hurry; "she was so afraid of disturbing you. But it is beginning to snow a little, and I insisted on her not remaining out in the cold."

"I should have been very much disappointed if you had," said Mr Smith, looking at her. "I was going to thank you for giving me this pleasure, and now you have spoilt all. I find it was only on compulsion."

"Yes, indeed," continued her father, going on with his part; "it was just that. She came on compulsion. She did not wish to come in at all."

"Papa," said Helen, laughing, "you are very rude to Mr Smith. We thought, you know," turning to him, "that it would only be a bore to you to have people; but hearing you were unwell, we felt we should like to know how you were. All we wanted was to know that you were better."

"And your man would have us in," added her father, wondering what she could have meant by telling him he was rude, after he had been drilled into saying the very things he had said. "Nothing else would do. I wanted him at least to ask—but no; he looked quite affronted at the idea."

"And well he might be," said his master. "John knows better than that. I really believe he has felt a spark of human pity for me to-day. He gave me a pathetic look when he came in with luncheon, and provided an extra roll. If he had let me be cheated out of the only pleasant thing I have had since morning, he would have deserved dismissal on the spot."

"You have had a dull time of it," said Mr Tolleton, with interest. "I wish I had known; I would have called much sooner."

He was very kind. Mr Smith would have been glad of his company. Anew he expressed his regrets.

"I can regret nothing now," said the host, courteously. He was looking at Helen, and she caught him in the act. How could he help looking at her? She had come to be looked at.

"And what have you been doing with yourself?" said she, at last. It was time for her father to subside.

"Reading, most of the day."

A pile of books lay on one side of the sofa; she took one up and read the title.

"You may have heard of it," said he, playfully. His spirits had all returned.

"Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress.' But I thought that was a child's book."

"If it is, I am a child in enjoying it. It is a great book of mine. Those are good illustrations, are they not?"

"Yes, beautiful."

"That is the land of Beulah you see—one of the best, I think; and this of the shepherd boy—the shepherd boy in the Valley of Humiliation. One of the most touching parts in the book; don't you think so?"

"Very pretty. I remember something about a boy, though it is a long time ago," said Miss Tolleton, feeling that a boy could never interest her as a man would.

"Yes, so it is; how long ago you may imagine. I can remember it!" said he, misunderstanding her. "It is one of the earliest recollections of my life. My mother had a curious old copy with dried cotton rushes in it, and a Giant Despair the size of a whole page. How the scent of that book in the cotton rushes came before me to-day! I don't know that anything brings back associations more strongly than a faint well-remembered scent. Something must have brought it up, though I could not find out what."

"Camphor?" cried she, eagerly catching at a subject on which she was again at home. "Don't you know how the smell of camphor seems to open an old drawer, and show you all the strange old brocaded gowns, and fur boas, and flapping hats?"

"That is a lady's experience," said Mr Smith, laughing. "Mr Tolleton, you must not keep looking out of the window all the time. It is going to snow, snow, snow, for the next four-and-twenty hours."

Mr Tolleton looked blank. "I hope not, sir, I'm sure."

"Why, it will not matter to you. You are safe within doors now, and when I do release my prisoners, I shall send them home. Pray, make yourself easy. You will not get away for some time, I can tell you."

"Oh, there is no hurry; only if it goes on like this——"

"The roads will not be impassable for good strong horses like mine."

"Take out your horses on such a day! I couldn't think of it, sir."

"Why not? It will be a treat to them to get out They

have had no exercise, except what the groom gives them, for three weeks."

"No, no. Helen, we could not do that, could we? This snow is nothing; it will clear off in a quarter of an hour. We can walk home nicely."

"Oh dear, yes, papa; it is no distance."

"Very well," said Mr Smith, ringing the bell; "we shall see. You are not going yet, at all events. John, bring tea, and ask Mrs Bacon to let us have some German cakes. Now," turning to Helen, "let me see you take off your hat, and look at home." The words slipped out before he meant.

"But what if other people come in? I should look rather odd." No, he need not think they had escaped her; they were music in her ears.

"Look outside, and see if that is probable. No, trust me, I shall have no other neighbours as kind as you. No one else would come out who could stay at home."

So saying, he put another log on the fire, and she quietly laid aside her hat.

"And this?" said he, touching her warm fur.

She put it off also.

"Well, you look very snug," said her father, after a minute's contemplation. "I—I think I shall take off my gaiters."

"Do!" cried his host—"do! Now this is charming; now I feel I am not altogether alone in the world. It is something to live in a place where there are friends like this. You have read me a lesson. I had been a regular misanthrope all day."

Mr Tolleton laughed from not knowing what to say. A deprecating, complimentary laugh. A laugh that was ready to follow any lead pointed out to it.

"So you see it is worth the sacrifice," continued Mr Smith.

"Sacrifice! I can answer for it there is no sacrifice," exclaimed Mr Tolleton, who knew now what he was about. "None on my part, I can tell you; and as for Helen, she looks uncommonly well pleased with everything."

"Indeed," said she, turning her smiling face toward him, "I only hope it will go on snowing."

Oh, how pleasant it all was!

Attracted by the now radiant firelight, a large black cat here strolled out from beneath the sofa, looking half asleep. "Oho, pussy! are you there? I thought you had gone to the kitchen," said her master, stroking the soft back as she fawned against his legs. "There!" lifting her up on his companion's knee. "Now, lie down and behave yourself. Many a cat would give a great deal to be where you are."

Helen's long white fingers sank in the fur, and she twisted pussy's ears, and pulled out its claws, with quite the air of a cat lover. She really did like creatures. If the cat had not been Mr Smith's, and he had not with his own hand lifted it up, she would still have allowed it to snuggle on her knee.

It was some time before tea came, and Miss Tolleton suspected they were not accustomed to it in the bachelor household.

When John did at length appear, he formed a contrast to the expert Corker. The tray was borne in before him, but seeing no place vacant, it was borne out again. Reappearing trayless, it was evident that, but for the company, he would have scratched his head. The library table was commodious, but far from the fire and from every one. There was only one other in the room, and it was covered. His master's "Take off the books, John, and bring that table here!" was a blessed relief.

"Your low tables delighted me so, that I have taken the liberty of copying them," said he. "I sent an order to Gillow's the same week, but they are not arrived yet. This is an old-fashioned tea-table, but I know you will take charge of it for me."

Of course she would; she liked it all the better. The fine white tablecloth, with the formal set out, the painfully precise plates and knives, the great silver butter-pail, and the hissing urn, so unlike the little knowing arrangements at Freelands, seemed to suit her at that moment better than anything else.

"If you please, sir," said John, in a sepulchral whisper, ere he left the room, "Mr Bowling is come, sir."

"Come? I am glad to hear it. I shall see him by-and-by. But he ought not to have come on such a day."

"Are we keeping you from any one now, pray——" began Mr Tolleton; but his host said hastily, and again

unconsciously addressing the daughter, "Indeed, no. It is only my butler, who has been ill and at home for two months. I shall be glad to have him back again. John!"

The footman stopped.

"Any one else come?"

"Yes, sir; they're all here. The woman——"

"Tell Mrs Bacon to take good care of them. She knows all about it. Poor creatures! To think of coming on such a day."

Helen looked ready to be sympathetic. "A poor family come to be looked after. Perhaps they will do for one of the lodges, Miss Tolleton. We must design some more plans some day."

Miss Tolleton was brightly acquiescent. But what an odd idea to have a whole family of poor people arriving in that way! What an odd man! She rather liked him for it. As for lodges, she was ready for *them* to any amount.

"What a pretty urn!" exclaimed Mr Tolleton, with great earnestness. "What a very pretty urn! I really think it is the prettiest urn I ever saw!"

The difficulty of maintaining conversation with Mr Smith, when Mr Smith would answer everything he said, to his daughter, almost overcame him. It was all right, of course, and very satisfactory that it should be so. But still he felt he ought to make himself heard sometimes. After the way he had talked at his own house too. He could think of nothing now. Even to have the tea-urn to admire was something.

They did not want him, those two, chatting away side by side on the sofa. Apparently they found plenty to say to each other, and he felt that if it were possible for him to subtract the newspaper from under Mr Smith's feet, he might read it comfortably, without his voice ever being missed. It was a little hard, that for decency's sake this privilege should be debarred him.

Helen seated herself at the table. How she enjoyed the German cakes, and her second cup of tea! She had given herself up to the pleasure of the passing hour.

"This is so much nicer than dinner," said she, sincerely.

Her father looked up, alarmed. Was it possible there were designs upon his dinner?

"Don't be afraid for me, papa. I cannot resist these delicious cakes, and I never care about dinner."

"But, my dear, I suppose—you don't mean that there is —eh!"

"Oh dear, no; I am no bird of ill omen. Your dinner is quite safe, papa. I was merely thinking of myself."

"Ah, you will be glad enough of yours too by-and-by. A sharp walk will soon bring back your appetite."

"Meantime there is no chance of the walk," said Mr Smith, pointing to the window, against which the snow-flakes were falling faster than before. "Pray, Mr Tolleton, let us hear no more about that walk. If it clears at all, it will be dark by that time. You would not be so cruel as to leave me for a long time yet. Let us forget all about it, until it is time to send to the stables."

All this was to Helen, in spite of the opening appeal to her father.

She looked at the window, looked at her host, said "Thank you," and the thing was settled.

By-and-by she resumed her seat upon the sofa. Whether he motioned her to it, or whether she had gone of her own accord, she hardly knew.

Black pussy reasserted its rights.

"Is it always here?" said she.

"It generally manages to find its way here in the course of the day."

"And have you had it long?"

"Several years—about five years, I think. But some friends had charge of it for me till lately."

"It reminds me of one I have seen somewhere. Ah, I know! It was at Aytoun Abbey."

"Aytoun Abbey! Of course it was; it was my very cat. How curious! how extraordinary! Poor pussy! I suppose it could hardly be expected to remember you. Yes," he continued, in a slightly constrained voice; "Mrs Aytoun kept it for me all the time I was in Greece. They are coming to spend Christmas at Sauffrenden, and, I dare-say, will like to see my pussy again."

All the time he spoke, he was looking her steadily in the face, and she as steadily was looking at him.

("Can she have heard?")

("Can he have heard?")

Then they began again. Helen spoke first; but for every word she said aloud, a mocking monitor within said two.

"It was Colonel Aytoun whom my father knew; but our knowledge of him was very slight. It is several years since I stayed at the Abbey." ("Coming to Sauffrenden! The very man of all men I should hate to have there! How dreadful! how intolerable! I must not think of it, or I shall show it in my face. I *must* be on my guard.") "They are old friends of yours, then, I suppose?"

"Yes; very old—acquaintances." What! he had a voice within, too. ("That man shall never be owned as a friend by me. She can have heard nothing, however, or she would never have said this.")

"It will be pleasant to meet, if it be only for a few days."

("Oh, if it were only for a few days we might manage; but if it should be for long!")

"Yes; Lady Sauffrenden and Mrs Aytoun are first cousins, though Mrs Aytoun is considerably older. This is their first visit."

"They came in the old days, it was there we met him," said Helen. She was bent on taking the matter easily; it must not be avoided for the world. Then a possibility occurred to her. "Mrs Aytoun, however, I have really never seen. She is such an invalid."

"She is, unfortunately; but she has not always been so. You don't know her? Oh, she is the one to be known."

"Perhaps this time—but their stay will be too short. A mere day or two, I suppose?" ("Why will he not tell me? If he only knew how much it is to me! Oh, what a break-up it might be! Just when all was going smoothly. Why must this trouble come now, of all times?")

"I have no idea. They never stay long anywhere."

A dawn of relief—a faint grey dawn. And this was all he could give her.

The subject was now dropped outwardly, though faster than ever talked the voices within.

"Your father is tired," said Mr Smith, glancing at the opposite arm-chair, where Mr Tolleton, overcome at last by the extreme difficulty of making conversation, the comfortable chair, the warmth of the room, and the humming monotony of the two tongues opposite, had fallen into a gentle doze.

Helen smiled. "He often takes a nap before dinner, and we never disturb him."

"Most gentlemen take their nap after dinner."

"Do you?"

"That is not fair. I have no inducement to keep me awake."

"I suspect the inducement sometimes fails."

"Not when it is strong enough."

"When is it strong enough?"

"When it is a wife."

A wife! She would have started, buckled on her armour, prepared for conquest on the spot, if only—he had said it with a little less decision, more hesitation, more significance.

"And the wife must be——?" said she, carelessly.

"If she were my wife, that would be enough."

"It is not always enough," with considerable emphasis.

He flushed up. "No, you are right, Miss Tolleton. I spoke in all the arrogant spirit of ignorance. Still I think—but I don't know—I am talking of what I know nothing."

The voice within was prating at this moment loudly.

("Never, Emmeline, never. Had you been my wife, you had never been the wan pale woman that you are. You would have been loved and cherished as a tender flower. Faded and drooping if it must have been, you would still have found a support, strong till death. My wife, how I would have loved you!")

"What were you going to say?" It was the softest woman's voice in the world that recalled him.

"I—I beg your pardon."

"Am I impertinent? But I should like so much to know. You spoke as if there were something on your mind. Pray, don't answer me if you had rather not."

He thought if he were ever to tell any one, it would be her.

"I had fallen into a foolish dream, Miss Tolleton, that was all; a bad habit caught by living alone. A wife" (he spoke boldly and laughingly now) "would have cured me of it. What a pity my chance is gone by!"

She wished he had not laughed; the laugh spoilt everything. She could not talk softly again. She could not wistfully penetrate into the foolish dream. She was thrown back into the broad daylight of commonplaces.

Badly as he was behaving, however, he showed one good

sign; he did not quit the subject. He treated it lightly and negligently, but he continued it. She might win him back to tenderness again, if she had only time. Mr Tolleton slept soundly, and that was the only thing that gave her hope.

"Men always laugh at women," said she, pettishly; "but I did not expect it from you."

"I laugh? My dear young lady, what could put that idea into your head?"

"Why, you laughed just now."

"A miserable fox-and-the-grapes laugh at myself. Why, I am a warning to everybody—a beacon. Imagine anybody believing me if I laughed at a wife."

"I am afraid you are very sarcastic."

"And I am afraid you are very sceptical."

She had no patience with him.

Snowing, snowing, outside. Within, a dim room, a sleeping chaperon, silence, and safety. It was hard on Helen. She could not make any impression. He slid out of her gentle grasp. He bragged of his freedom to her very face.

Such behaviour was not to be borne. She must have him now, come what would.

After a minute's thought she said—"I am afraid I am rather sore on the subject, that is the truth. It is always so strongly on my mind what my dear father lost as a wife, and we as a mother, that I never feel inclined to laugh about it. I daresay it is very silly."

He was grave in an instant. Her arrow had sped at last.

"No, indeed; the feeling does you honour. You must miss your mother dreadfully."

"The worst of it is the not missing her, I believe. We hardly realise what we have lost, we only feel it." She had said the same thing before, and it struck her as rather good. Besides, the sentiment was genuine, and when she could be genuine, she would. "If our mother had been alive," said Helen, with the utmost sincerity, "we should never have grown up the wild, giddy girls we are."

"My dear Miss Tolleton, who would ever accuse you of giddiness?"

"I accuse myself."

"Then that is enough. Even if the accusation be true, it is enough. To accuse one's self is to be sorry, and to be sorry is to amend."

"But it is so difficult."

He looked surprised.

"One gets run away with, you know. My sisters and I have high spirits, and there is no one to hold us in. No," looking at her father, "really no one. Then, when it is over, we are sorry. But I daresay people say we are dreadfully flighty."

"Indeed, I never heard it said." But at that moment he remembered Lady Sauffrenden. Was this what she meant? How stern, how harsh, such a judgment! And they, in their poor, bright, happy spirits, had had that said of them. It was cruelly unjust.

Helen went on. She was anxious to pursue this topic. Who could tell what he might hear of her soon?

"I do wish I were more serious," said she, with a sigh.

"You are too young to be serious, my dear." He had suddenly put on a paternal air. "No, I should not put you off with nonsense like that. No one is too young to be serious—very serious at times. But a light-hearted gaiety is one of the brightest ornaments of youth, and it is not meant to be curbed and checked at every turn."

"But when it leads us astray?"

"We have a Father to return to, not a stern, frowning Judge."

Her eyes dropped.

"Will you not tell your Father?"

"Indeed, indeed," said she, with sudden fire, "that is what I wish. I often hate myself. And I feel so ashamed, I think I will never give way again. I will try to get good and quiet like other girls. But then it is always the same thing over again."

"Don't look so hopeless; be sure it is not. The temptation must grow weaker or stronger. Try to let it be weaker."

"How?"

"Watch and pray."

She could not speak, and her breathing came quick and short. He thought she was offended.

"Have I said too much?"

"Oh no."

"Say you forgive me, then."

"I forgive! Oh, you don't know; you would not say that, if you did. You do me good; you could make me good. I—I mean—I hardly know what I say, Mr Smith. No one ever talked to me like that before."

His hand was laid on hers for a moment.

"It is you——" But he got no further. The tables were turned upon her once more, and he had the best of it.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SHORT EXPLANATION.

THERE is no need to make a mystery of Mr Smith's past life. He was neither a changeling, nor an impostor, nor one without right to his name and fortune.

He came honestly, of a comfortable, homely stock. He had been designed for a mercantile life, and people who knew nothing about him believed he had made his money in mercantile transactions. This, however, was not the case. It had been left him at so early an age that he had been able to reap the full benefit of it. He had been to Oxford, and travelled.

But, nevertheless, his life had a story.

When he spoke to Helen Tolleton about the Aytouns, he was anxious to discover whether it had ever reached her. He had got his present information about them from the newspapers. Under the heading "Fashionable Intelligence" this paragraph had arrested his attention: "Col. the Hon. Egerton Aytoun and Mrs Aytoun, from V——, the seat of the Duke of L——, for Sauffrenden Castle, to be the guests of Lord and Lady Sauffrenden during Christmas."

He had not been able to read the announcement without emotion.

Emmeline Just, the gentle, beautiful girl, and Emmeline Aytoun, the sickly, dwining wife, meant the same person to him.

Twenty years ago he had been her suitor, and no unacceptable one. There was no grey in his temples then. He was black-haired, red and sunburnt, and though not tall, well formed and broad-shouldered. The singular sweetness of his voice, the charm of his manner, the nameless attraction which still, when he was stout, and grey, and fifty, drew people towards him, were in full play. He was in the meridian of life. A man with manhood's experience, manhood's maturity, manhood's deliberate self-knowledge; yet with the resolute, determined hope of youth.

He spoke, and was listened to.

Her parents approved the match, for he was rich and respectable, and they, the poor relations of a noble family.

It would place Emmeline again in her proper sphere. It would help forward the boys. It would be a wonderful relief in every way.

They must not expect everything. He had brought money, and they must yield birth. Poor souls! They would gladly have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage.

Accordingly all went smoothly for a season. The wedding-day drew near. Presents, dresses, plate, furniture, all the pleasant bustle of the occasion pervaded the house.

Old Lady Just fell ill. She was to have been present. She had made a push to come, so delighted was she—were they all—with the match. A note came from her, so sorry, so vexed, to have to give it up, but the doctor had said she really *must;* and so, of course, there was no resisting that fiat. She should think of them all on *the day,* and hoped to be *quite well,* and down-stairs again by the time *dear* Emmeline and her dear new nephew came to the Towers. They would not, of course, *think* of putting it off.

She wrote this two days before she died, and the wedding was put off for a month.

It was but a short delay, and the pleasant bustle continued to go on in undertones.

Then came Colonel Aytoun, with his high-sounding name, his sparkling uniform, his fair moustache; going to his review, listening to his band, hearing of his ball; and the old thing happened which happens over and over again.

Poor bride! How hard she strove to behave well, but

she had not the power. She had neither the force of character to conquer, nor the hypocrisy to pretend.

Her struggles, her dejection, her pining away, were too evident.

What lover would not know what these things meant —his voice no longer the one to please, his smile a sting, his gifts coals of fire?

There was nothing to be done, no one to be angry with.

All was quietly surrendered, the parents consoled,—it was he who had to console them—and thousands of miles put between himself and happiness.

Some years after, they met again. Four years, but how she was altered! The beauty was there, perhaps, but the life, the spirit of it was gone.

His brother officers said it was his doing. Every one knew what Eggy Aytoun was, the only wonder being that any parents would give their daughter to him. A regular riff. And yet he was as jealous of any one speaking to her as if he were a pattern husband. Nobody dared take notice of her. It was a pity she knocked under so much. A wife with a temper of her own might have tamed him, but she had no chance with such a fellow.

And then they all agreed that she was a poor thing; and danced as often as they possibly could with her on every opportunity, finding a delightful stimulation in the scowling face behind; and thoughtlessly, not cruelly, drawing down those black looks and words, from which they should have shielded her.

Colonel Aytoun was one who cared for nothing unless it were new. While it was new, it was all in all. His betrothed had been lovely, perfect, for a few weeks; the wedding-ring was scarcely on her finger before he found her insipid.

To his vanquished rival he magnanimously affirmed he bore no malice.

He was invited to the Abbey. Emmeline was set to ask him, and for her sake he went. Why his presence was desired was soon clear. He was a sheep to be shorn of its fleece. He had been robbed already of his one ewe-lamb, and now more was required.

He thought it over, and allowed himself to be swindled.

Colonel Aytoun was rampant. He was not rich, but

over and above the pleasure of having these reinforcements to a short purse, it was a most delightful occupation of his talents to take in the man to whom he bore no malice.

It was charming to be able to tell Emmeline of the last rise he had taken out of that simpleton—her lamented bridegroom; to wonder how she had really not been rather ashamed of selecting such an imbecile, harmless though he was; to suppose that it might have been a case of "birds of a feather;" and then to grin and jeer at her with his smiling red lips, and bid her go and seek the society of such a congenial spirit, for he was sick of keeping company with babies out of long clothes.

O Emmeline, Emmeline!

It was for this he did it. He, the unforgiven—the forgiving; the injured—the benefactor; the forsaken—the one friend; he was all she had to look to.

Pure, true heart, he did it for this! Loving and honouring still, yet faithful in its guard as an angel's guard, the heart was loyal, and the conscience clear.

He would never desert her while it was within his power. Colonel Aytoun might have his wretched hundreds—they were the price he was ready to pay. But his coarse companionship, his patronage, his affected friendliness, were harder to be borne.

And Mr Smith was not a man who took things easily. He never made-believe to himself. His charity might cover the multitude of sins, but he was perfectly aware they were there.

Some, perhaps, would have said there were good points about Colonel Aytoun. He did not believe there was one. In his heart he considered him the wickedest, worst, most *disagreeable* man he had ever met in his life.

And yet he stayed at the Abbey.

When he was not there, Emmeline was often months alone. She was not allowed to visit, and few people cared to visit her. Bold, doubtful ladies came now and then, her husband's friends; very, very rarely, ladies who were neither. These never came twice. They were scared by the strange ways of the house, overwhelmed by the monopolising attentions of the host in the first instance, and thunderstruck at the neglect which was sure to follow. The spiritless, timid wife gave them a chill. They breathed

freely only when the iron gates had clanged behind them, and then they vowed never to come again.

As for men, they were not invited, with the exception of Mr Smith. Colonel Aytoun was not clever enough to draw money from any one who was not prepared to let it go. He could not win at cards or at billiards, and he found it unprofitable to try.

He did not want associates, and assuredly no one wanted to associate with him. He was universally unpopular. Men as repulsive called him repulsive; men as needy sneered at his neediness. He was bad, and he was poor. He was disliked on both accounts.

It gave Mr Smith an uncomfortable feeling to hear Miss Tolleton say she had stayed at the Abbey. At first, for Emmeline's sake. He was jealous of any one spying out the secrets of that prison-house. Old as his love-tale was, its dear inhabitant was as dear to him as ever; and as anxiously as ever would he shield her if he could, from the cold pity which the world bestows on those who are no longer able to adorn it.

But second thoughts soon came in. Miss Tolleton had owned to no acquaintanceship with Mrs Aytoun. She kept her room, no doubt, when they were there. But still, a young girl, staying in the house, it might surely have been expected she would find her way there.

Colonel Aytoun had been at the bottom of it. He had kept them apart—kept this pleasure from his dreary wife. Probably he had tried to make friends with Helen himself. If so, he thought he could tell with what result. Her high spirit would ill stand his fawning adulation.

She had repulsed him with contempt. He had been disgusted and defeated. It was no wonder that she had repudiated the idea of anything beyond the very slightest acquaintanceship.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANOTHER RETROSPECT.

If Mr Smith believed that Colonel Aytoun was nothing to Helen, she would have been surprised beyond measure had she been told that Colonel Aytoun's wife was anything to Mr Smith.

She had never suspected him. All her tremors, her outward composure, her inward agitation, were for herself. While in his company she had kept these thoughts down with a high hand, resolved on this at all costs, that she would banish from her countenance every tell-tale look, from her voice every unnatural tone.

And she had succeeded. Her visit had gained for her all that it ought to have done. The few serious words at the end still sounded in her ears.

Yet there was food for meditation. He liked her, he admired her, he all but loved her; but—that was the point.

She knew that he had pressed her hand at parting, and she could recall more than one fervent gaze. She felt that she had touched him, but still she had not won him; and the more difficult he was to be won, the more worth the winning he became.

Her spirit would have risen to meet the difficulty but for one drawback. Between her and him had arisen a sudden cloud—a cloud so thundery, so dangerous, so close at hand, that she felt unable to think of it without apprehension.

Lily rallied her sister on her thoughtful aspect several times during the evening, but desisted with some alarm on receiving a whispered communication that she should hear all when they were alone, and that it was nothing to laugh about. She seized her sister's arm to ask only one thing, Was it all right with—she knew who?

"Yes, yes," replied Helen, impatiently. "But it may go wrong yet. I am going to tell you all about it, if you let me alone now."

Carry went off to bed, unsuspecting that there was any-

thing to be told. She liked to have a room by herself, and the other sisters slept together.

Before she left they had put on their scarlet dressing-gowns, shaken down their hair, and, brushes in hand, drawn their chairs close to the fire.

"This is cosy," said Lily. "Now let me hear it. But first, why did you mind Carry's knowing?"

"Because she never can be careful. I am going to tell her a little, however, as soon as I have thought it over. It is a dreadful bore, I can tell you, Lily."

"Is it?" said Lily; "you look as if it were. I have been thinking what it can be, all evening, but I cannot imagine, unless that George Lance——"

"George Lance! I don't care twopence about George Lance! What could have put him into your head? We shall never see him again."

"Well, you know, Nelly, everybody said——"

"Oh, never mind!" cried her sister, with an impatient jerk. "George Lance, and what everybody said, may be at the bottom of the sea for all I care! This is quite different."

"What is it, then?"

"The Aytouns are at the Castle."

"And what are the Aytouns to us?" responded Lily, with unfeigned surprise and some disappointment. Her expectations had been wound up to a high pitch.

"You were such a child when we knew them that you scarcely remember, but their coming may be a great deal to us."

"I thought you and he had been rather friends."

"So we were."

"And he gave you that lovely dagger-thing."

"Pshaw!"

"Give it to me, then."

Helen made another impatient jerk.

"I was going to offer you a bargain for it the other day," Lily went on, innocently. "When I saw it lying in your rubbish-drawer, I knew you had given over caring for it, and it is a pity that it should be wasted. There is either Uncle Robert's locket, or perhaps I might be induced to let you have the coral. You know you want the coral, and you have not worn the dagger for months. I believe," she

added, laughing, "that you are afraid Mr Smith may inquire into its history!"

"It is that," said Helen, emphatically, "which I *am* afraid of."

"There is no harm if he did, Nelly. Girls often get presents. He might as well take a lesson, and give you something nice himself."

"How little you know him!" exclaimed her sister. "Now Lily, listen, and do not talk any more nonsense. Mr Smith is as different from Colonel Aytoun as—an angel of light from an angel of darkness!"

Lily laughed aloud. "Oh, good heavens! Mr Smith an angel of light! What next?"

"Oh, *do* be quiet!" groaned her sister. "I want help so much, and you do nothing but laugh. I had better say no more."

"No, no, Nelly; I am quite grave now. Mr Smith is an angel, an archangel, if you will. I won't laugh again. Now for Colonel Aytoun."

"Well, you remember our staying at the Abbey, just after I left Madame Voucher's? When Aunt Maria would not hear of my being introduced, because I was only seventeen. The Aytouns were at Sauffrenden that summer, and we met them there once or twice, and he came here, and made such a point of our going to the Abbey, that papa and I went without Aunt Maria's knowledge. We had quite a proper invitation, but when we went there Mrs Aytoun was shut up in her room. We never saw her at all, and I am sure now that she did not choose to see us. One could not wonder at her, for every one knows the way he behaves; and he did—did make a great deal of me on all possible occasions. Of course, in his own house, he had it all his own way. We two were together all day long. He managed either to send papa out fishing or shooting, and stay at home with me; or else to take me driving in the curricle, and be afraid there was no room for more than two. As it happened, I am glad he was so rude to papa, for papa had been so charmed with him at first, that if his civilities had continued, papa would never have been detached from him."

"But it was rather good fun for you."

"Oh dear, yes. I thought it the best fun in the world.

We used to go wandering about the old ruins together, listening to the owls in the ivy, reading poetry, and singing duets in the drawing-room in the dusk. And then I went fishing with him, and once we took luncheon with us, and were not in the whole day. Papa did not altogether like that, and I got a lecture when he smelt me of smoke; but I coaxed him into forgetting it. We were there nearly a fortnight, and then papa said we must go; but Colonel Aytoun would not hear of it. He knew papa's weak side, and flattered him; and you know there was no absolute reason why we should not stay. No one was at home, and we had no other engagements, and I, like the silly girl I was, told this to Colonel Aytoun, and we laughed over it, and I said papa *should* stay; and stay he did."

"And when did you begin to dislike him?"

"Oh, only the last evening, and I think the dislike has grown since. Who would have thought of their coming to the Castle, when we heard Lord Sauffrenden and he had quarrelled? That must have been a mistake, or else they have made it up again. Mr Smith could have told me about it, I daresay, but I could not ask him. He had no idea how he was tormenting me, when he would give me no information beyond the bald fact that they were to be there. No one would have been more sorry than he, if——"

"Never mind him; I can imagine it all. You and he got quite affectionate after your tea, with papa pretending to be asleep on the other side of the fire, and watching you like a cat all the time!"

"He was not!"

Lily laughed. "Dear me! if he did, I daresay there was nothing to see. Mr Smith's conversation would not be very edifying. However, if it will make you come quicker to the point, I may tell you that that was a put in of my own. He was as sound as a top, and I'm sure I should have been the same, with only you two old humdrums grunting away into each other's ears all afternoon. Now for the Colonel; he is much more interesting."

"He is nothing of the kind," said Helen, warmly. "I should never compare the two men."

"Oh, come, that's going too far. One old, the other young——"

"Both exactly of an age, if you please; or rather, I be-

lieve Colonel Aytoun to be the elder of the two. Do you know what Mr Smith's age is?"

"Not in the least. I thought it safest not to inquire into it too minutely."

"He is barely fifty. He was just fifty when he came here."

"I thought he was about that. Is not that old?"

"Not what any people, except school-girls, call old. Of course, one would not say he was young; but except for the little bunch of grey on his temples, he has nothing old about him."

"Except his waistcoat."

"I have seen many men of twenty as stout as he. He has no stomach. If there is one thing worse than another, it is a thin man sticking out in front."

"I know," said Lily, laughing; "I grant you that. No, he has not a bad figure, but it is a middle-aged figure. It is not the figure of a young man, even though he were twenty stone. However, you are quite right to stand up for him, and I hope you always will. Just tell me now, like a good creature, you did think to-day he was very, *very* friendly, did you not?"

"Well, yes," said Helen, half smiling, half frowning; "I did."

"But he did not say anything?"

"No, *no*, NO! How often am I to tell you that? Nothing such as you expect, at all events. Something there was, between jest and earnest, a little bit of romance——"

"Nelly, if he gets to romance, he is done for."

"So you think; but I may be done for in another way first. Colonel Aytoun's coming has spoilt all."

"Why? He need never know anything about this. Perhaps they may never meet."

"Is that likely when they are old friends? I do wonder that they should be friends at all, by the by. Why, the way in which it came out that he knew them showed them to be most intimate. It was about the cat. That very cat that sat on my knee this afternoon was the one I used to see creeping into Mrs Aytoun's room in the Abbey."

"You were not so fond of it then."

"I might never have noticed it all, but for Colonel

Aytoun's being so angry once because it broke something, and he called it 'Mrs Aytoun's cat,' and made such a fuss that it was quite ridiculous. I took the cat's part, to tease him, and we had a mock quarrel; and that was how I remembered the creature. At least, I recollected what it was like, though I *was* surprised when Mr Smith said it was the same."

"Do you think Mr Smith had heard anything of your flirtation?"

"Not yet; of that I am prefectly sure. But I think he looked a little taken aback at our having stayed there. It is no secret, the way that man behaves to his wife, and there is no doubt people don't care to go to the house."

"Then there is no reason why he ever should hear," said Lily, pursuing her own thoughts. "The whole thing is over and done with. Every one has forgotten it."

"Colonel Aytoun has not, I suspect. I do think he still likes me well enough to dislike the idea of my marrying any one else. He has tried often to make me renew our acquaintance, but that I never will do."

"You have not told me much, after all. Is there anything more?"

"Yes."

"Go on, then,"

"I do hate the thought of it so much. It happened the evening before we came away. I was passing his study, a little room off the stairs, and he called to me from the inside to come in. He was standing by the window, examining something in his hand. I went in at once, and he said he had got a present for me, though not much of one; however, such as it was, I must wear it for his sake. For *his* sake! I did not say a word, for I did not quite like this. It had been all sentiment, and sympathy, and congeniality before, and I thought this was different. But I could not say 'No;' so he fastened it round my waist, and then, quite suddenly, he began to talk the most absurd nonsense you ever heard in your life."

"Nelly!"

Helen flung herself back in her chair. "Oh dear, my eyes *were* opened then! I stared so at him that it absolutely made him stop. For a moment I had the best of it. Then he had the insolence to beg me not to *pretend!* I

must know all about it; and he seized my hand, and began calling me by my name, and——"

"And what?"

"Oh, I never was more thankful than to hear papa's step on the stairs outside! I rushed to the door, and then, oh Lily! as if anything ever was more cruelly unfortunate, out flew from my frock, here, a copy of verses he had given me in the morning. There was nothing much in them; but they were flattering, and rather pretty. 'To Helen's Eyes,' I think it was. Just the sort of little effusion that any one might make, and no harm done. And I had treasured this up. Oh, you should have seen the look upon his face when he gave it to me, with a little bow, and a smile like—like a devil!"

"And what did you do?" said her sister, drawing a breath.

"The worst, worst thing I could have done. I have gone over that scene again and again in my mind, and anything would have been better than what I did. I saw, of course, what he must think — what nobody could have helped thinking—and there seemed to be no spirit left in me. The tears *would* come."

"Oh Nelly, did you cry?"

"I could cry now. That he should be able to suppose I had loved a man like him! and no doubt he really in his heart believes this still. I daresay he blames his precipitation, and thinks I was shocked and vexed; but no doubt he plumes himself that the deed was done. Is it not dreadful? I forgot the dagger, and went away as best I could; and he let me go quietly, for he thought he could make it all smooth next day. I think he reckoned on the night I should have, but he did not know how it would leave me in the morning. At breakfast he met us with his usual cool command not to go. We had been talking about it the evening before, but he could not possibly spare us; and he was sure Miss Tolleton, at least, would not desert him. I looked him full in the face, and told him he was mistaken. That is the only part of my visit to the Abbey I can look back upon with anything but shame. That moment I *like* to think of. His cheek flushed up, and such a savage look came into his face that I longed to say it over again. I never felt such rage in my life as I did then.

Papa did whatever I bid him, and we left directly. He, Colonel Aytoun, seemed as if he could hardly believe his eyes. He met me on the stairs, and began in his softest tones. 'And are you *really* in earnest?' and was going on, when I stopped him by calling to papa to come and say 'good-bye.' And 'good-bye' we said, with all decency, for the servants were looking on, and besides, it was better —and then we got into the carriage. I had written to the town for one early in the morning, that we might not be dependent on his. He would have said the horses were lame, or made some other excuse; so papa took a line himself, and found a boy, and sent it off, without anybody's knowledge. Papa was very good and kind about it all."

"But how could you be so foolish about the verses?"

"Foolish! How should I imagine things would turn out so?"

"I mean, how could you *care* to keep them there?"

"Pshaw! It was the merest piece of sentiment."

"That sort of sentiment I cannot imagine. It was very nice to get them, and nice to keep them; but as for wearing them!"

"Think what a child I was. It seemed so fine and romantic to me, that I never dreamt of anything more. My head was turned with reading novels, and I wanted to be a heroine myself, and this came in my way. He took the exact measure of me so far, but he checkmated himself."

"But you kept the dagger?"

"What could I do with it? I could not leave it in my room, for the maids to make a story of; and I was resolved not to speak to him. I meant to throw it away; but—well, I am ashamed to say I have worn it sometimes, as you know, when the visit began to grow dim in my memory; and there never was any one who knew about it to see. Not that I ever mean to wear it again."

"And what are you afraid of now?" said Lily, thoughtfully. "Do you think he wants to see you again?"

"Yes, I do, indeed. I think, when he was at the opera that night, when we pretended not to see him, and he stared at us the whole time, he had a renewal of his old feelings. You know, Charley Hill asked who he was; and even Uncle Robert noticed his fixed look at our box."

"I wonder, then, that he has not been down here before now."

"How can we tell what may have kept him? He is here now, at all events. Oh dear!" with a sigh, "I wish I knew how long they would stay. I shall never breathe freely till they are gone. If one could only have a little illness!"

"And Mrs Hunt?"

"What of her? She is all smiles now. You know, if it *is* either of them, it is Maria!"

"I suppose after that night at the Hill there can be no doubt, not even an 'If it *is!*'" cried Lily. "Oh, Nelly, it was really cruel the way you played into that poor girl's hands!"

"Not into hers—into her mother's. It might be cruel, but it was necessary. I cannot possibly have Mrs Hunt's long nose being poked after me at every turn. I shall have enough to do with Colonel Aytoun."

"Do you think he will come to this house?"

"Oh yes, I am sure he will. But Corker must have strict orders that we are not at home, and we must really *be* not at home. He has the most extraordinary way of finding out things. If we were in the drawing-room, and he was denied admittance, he would ferret his way in somehow or other."

"But if we go out we shall meet him."

"You and Carry may. He does not know you, and could not speak to you. I shall keep to the plantation. Or if I am at home, I could go to my room, and lock the door."

"What if papa meets him?"

"He will do very well. Colonel Aytoun knows he never liked him."

"But he will show surprise, and be taken off his guard."

"Let him show surprise—*that* does not matter."

"I think you had better tell him they are here. In the flurry of meeting, he would probably ask him to dinner."

"He might. You are right. I shall tell him to-morrow—and Carry too."

A pause, while each sister laid down her brush, and began to plait her long hair for the night.

"I think," said Lily, suddenly, "that it would be well

to see as little as possible of Mr Smith while they are here."

"Yes."

"What a pity, Nelly, that he did not embrace his opportunity to-day!"

"You still expect that? I wish I could make you understand that——"

"Oh, I understand; I understand it all perfectly. But one thing, just tell me one thing, and I will ask no more."

"What is it?"

"If he did—did *it*, you know—would you say 'yes'?"

Helen was about to put her off with a jest as heretofore, but something in Lily's face checked her.

She had made up her mind by this time, and, after a minute's thought, told her sister what it was.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DOOR-BELL.

NEXT morning Helen tapped at the door of her father's room, and remained closeted with him some minutes before coming down to breakfast.

It was necessary that he should be told something of the business in hand.

He had his part to play, and when he knew what it was, would play it. She had to show him what it was.

Carry also had to receive instructions. Lily read her her lesson, and ended by saying the siege had begun.

At first the siege was not unpleasant. Enough snow had fallen to render the lanes impassable, and the more frequented roads were ankle-deep in mud and slush. Had there been no reason for staying at home, there would still have been no inducement to go out.

One day, however, finer than the rest, tempted the younger ones; and Helen, fretting for intelligence, advocated their walking to the village, and if nothing better offered, calling at least, on Mrs Hunt.

Nothing better did offer, and Mrs Hunt was found at home. Thus much they gained from her—Mr Smith was still confined to the house, and Maria in bed with a cough. "A sympathetic cough," Lily had suggested, and had got a benign look, a tap on the arm, and an admonition not to say such things.

They had nothing else to report. No one from the Castle had been visible anywhere, except, yes, a footman hurrying down with late letters for the post. The footman had touched his hat, but naturally had not volunteered any information.

"Why did you leave the front door open?" said Helen, who had come down from her room. "It always makes a draught in here."

"Don't shut it; it is for papa. He will be in in a few minutes. We left it unfastened when we went out, that we might slip in without Corker's knowing, and I told him to do the same."

"But you need not have left it so wide."

"If he didn't see it open, he would forget. It cannot matter for these few minutes. He will be here directly."

Helen yawned, and returned to her book. She had drawn an arm-chair on one side of the fire, and, with her feet on the fender, was having a cosy afternoon of it.

Carry sat wearily down opposite, complaining that she was tired, and her feet wet. She began to unbutton her boots. "Lily, will you ring, and I'll get Thomson to bring me down my slippers."

"Why can't you go up yourself? It is such an untidy thing to do, and Corker is just coming with tea, and it makes such a fuss," said Lily.

"Never mind, then; I'll take them off, and wait till it is time to dress."

So saying she drew off one boot, and was proceeding to disencumber herself of the second, when her sister started forward in her chair, exclaiming, "Who was that?"

"Papa," said Lily, faintly.

"It *was not*," said Helen. "It was he!"

Lily flew to the door. "I can stop Corker."

But even before she had time to turn the handle, her face changed. "Oh, Nelly, the front door."

"Yes," said Helen, quietly, as the bell at that instant

rang with a loud peal. "It is too late. Sit still, and neither of you leave the room."

"I am so sorry," whispered Lily.

Her sister nodded; she was not angry—she was gathering all her wits about her for the interview.

Steps were heard outside. "Oh, I can't get on this boot!" gasped the poor sloven, tearing off the tag as she spoke, with a face of fire. "What shall I do? Lily!"

Lily turned, seized the boot, and thrust it under the sofa. She had not time for more than the muffled command, "Sit still, and it will never be seen." Then the door opened, and when Colonel Aytoun was announced, all three calmly raised their heads and looked at him, as if only half roused from their engrossing occupations.

He had been told the ladies were not at home, but he knew better. He had had the audacity to tell the man he was mistaken, for the ladies had just returned, and the open door attested to the truth of his observation. Corker was defeated. He supposed it was all right, and Colonel Aytoun was ushered into the drawing-room.

There they were. He thought he had caught them. He expected to see an instantaneous flutter, an astonishment, an agitation.

Never was man more outwitted by woman.

Miss Tolleton, indeed, allowed a slow surprise to gather in her face, but it was a surprise so full of indifference as to bear no flattering interpretation. The next instant she feigned to recollect herself, to be trying to appear pleased for the sake of politeness; and to be anxious to be civil, while in reality she was bored. Bored was exactly the word; not nervous, not angry, not startled, and not afraid—yet not delighted.

It was a bore to get out of her comfortable lounge, and be interrupted in the third volume of her novel; to have to sit up and make small talk, and simper, and smirk; and all for a man she had almost forgotten.

Such was the impression she meant to give, and she gave it.

Nevertheless, her sisters were brought forward, her father's absence regretted, his appearance promised, and Colonel Aytoun begged to come a little nearer the fire, with a perfectly good grace. Civil inquiries were next

made for Mrs Aytoun, followed by the usual appropriate felicitations on her improved health. In his turn the visitor had to go through preliminaries; but when he had observed that there was no need to ask how she was, since his eyes could tell him, and that he had hoped to have met her at the Castle, and that there was a large party staying there, he found some difficulty in going on.

Accordingly Lily entered the lists.

Was not the snow dreadful? And the thermometer going down so that she was certain it must freeze directly. They were in despair about skating. Did he think there was any chance of its keeping clear for skating?

Yes, Colonel Aytoun thought there was a very good chance; in fact, every prospect of it. Had they any good skating-ground in the neighbourhood?

On this point there was a great deal to be said. They had meadows which, when flooded deep enough, made the best skating-ground that could be imagined. During some winters they had been flooded for miles. Other seasons they had not been so fortunate. The most provoking thing was, when the frost came too soon, and they were rough with weeds and grass. If only a sharp frost would set in at once, without any more snow, the meadows would be in perfection.

Colonel Aytoun, however, had not come there to talk to Lily about skating.

Having heard her out, he politely carried on the topic, while introducing another, and returned to her sister. "You used to be fonder of fishing than skating."

"I? I have not fished since I was a child."

"Have you forgotten the Abbey?"

"I was a child then, Colonel Aytoun, in everything but wearing short frocks."

In the haughty flush which gathered on her cheek his eye could detect no sign of faltering.

"It seems to me," he said, "like yesterday."

"It seems to me like another life."

"What are you talking about, Helen?" inquired her sister, innocently. "It makes you sound quite old."

"Yes, I daresay; it makes me feel so. A visit that I paid when you were at school, Lily, and I ought to have been there too. It was the first time I had ever stayed

anywhere in my life, and I daresay Mrs Aytoun thought me a dreadful girl, for I had no idea how to behave myself."

"I am not aware that my wife had very much of your society," said Colonel Aytoun, drily. "That pleasure was reserved for me."

"If it was a pleasure, which is rather doubtful. Having an ignorant school-girl to drag about, is not usually thought much of a pleasure. But Mrs Aytoun—surely I remember now—she was very unwell all the time, and we were left for you to entertain. How you must have anathematised us! But you were very kind."

"And so were you," significantly, emphatically.

Helen gave him a vacant look, an unmeaning smile. He was talking polite humbug.

Her sister spoke again. "She was a regular romp then, was she not? She is always telling us of the odd things she used to do, and the scrapes she got into. It is too bad that she should be so particular with Carry and me, when every one laughs at the way she used to go on herself."

Helen laughed a little too, gently. "You absurd child, no one would ever think you were kept much in order. I am sure I don't get credit for being half strict enough."

"Are you, then, so much changed?" said Colonel Aytoun.

"It is to be hoped so, at least, with two younger sisters to set an example to."

"A valuable example, no doubt."

"So my flatterers tell me," carelessly.

"Do you reckon me a flatterer?"

"I really never thought about it."

He bit his lip. The insolence of the girl! What! Did she talk to him like this? Did she dare to assume airs to him, as if he were an old man, and she just come to her womanhood?

What had wrought this inconceivable change? He thought she had been merely a little mortified, a little chagrined. She had gone off in a passion, and he had given the pretty vixen time to cool.

Until now he had never been able to come after her; but, on coming, he had meant at once to resume his sway.

This was his reception. He was, like Samson, shorn of his strength; no longer terrible, no longer able to inspire

either love or hatred. He read in her face the unaffected truth—at least, he thought he did.

"It appears, then," said he, bitterly, "that you have no memory for old friends."

"Indeed I have. The rest of my father's friends don't tell me so, I assure you."

"Am I considered one of your father's friends?" Stinging, mortifying, intolerable thought.

"Well, I hope so" (smiling). "I have always thought you one, I am sure. Pray don't declare yourself his enemy. Or if you do, wait, at least, till we have time to warn him, for he is just coming in, and must have time to put on his battle array."

Colonel Aytoun's temper was fast rising. How could he keep from showing it? How should he be expected to smile and dissemble, and stab like a woman? What match was he for a Helen, aided by a Lily?

"I suppose I ought not to have looked for recognition at all!" said he, at last, with an angry laugh.

"Oh yes—you. How can you say that? But, to tell the truth, I should not have been surprised if you had failed to recognise me. Had our meeting been accidental, of course. At least, you would have taken my youngest sister for me."

"I am often taken for Helen," chimed in Lily.

Colonel Aytoun looked at her with contempt. He would not answer.

At this moment another loud ring of the door-bell made the hearts of all three sisters jump.

Brave and quick-witted as she was, the blood rushed to Helen's face, and oh, she knew he saw it!

Next moment brought an intense relief, for in walked, not Mr Smith, but Captain Wellwood.

She could draw breath again. Philip was bad enough, to be sure, but it might have been infinitely worse.

She could no longer pretend as she had pretended. That stupid blush had undone her. She had given Colonel Aytoun the cue. He had not been outgrown, but supplanted.

This, at all events, was how she knew he would interpret her start.

That the supplanter should be supposed to be Philip

Wellwood, and not Mr Smith, was a great deal; but she wished—oh, she wished so much!—that there had been no question of either.

The surprise of both gentlemen was unfeigned. They had shot together in the morning, and hated each other cordially. Philip had the best grounds for his dislike. He hated Colonel Aytoun for the same reasons that every one else did; while Colonel Aytoun merely hated him for the same reasons that he hated every one else.

To descend to particulars, Colonel Aytoun had taken the best shots, and then told stories about them; whereas Captain Wellwood had merely brought home the heaviest bag.

Not a word had been said by either about the Miss Tolletons. Not a word of any projected visit to them. And each, accordingly, felt duly enraged at seeing the other. Each considered his manor was being poached upon.

"Ah, Colonel, I had no idea of finding you here." Thus much Captain Wellwood could say, without expressing disgust. But the Colonel turned his back. That was her fellow, then.

Heavily dragged the visit now.

Neither visitor would open his lips to any but the eldest sister. Each listened to every word the other said. Each was doing his outside to discover the extent of the other's intimacy. Both were fixed in an equal resolve, not to be the one to leave first.

All this even the slowly comprehending Carry could perceive.

She had sat absolutely silent since the beginning of the visit; after drawing her chair in front of the opening through which her boot had disappeared.

On Captain Wellwood's taking a seat a little behind, she had reflected with agony that it might have been thrown too far, according to Lily's usual strong way of doing things. But discovering, by the appearance of half an inch of black cord on her side of the sofa, that such had not been the case, she had again given herself up to listening and observing.

She was now looking anxiously at Helen.

Helen had made several dumb signs, which she understood to mean that their father was wanted. The unfor-

tunate complication of her boot had been forgotten, and she was to fetch him. But this in her short walking-dress it was impossible she should do.

Glad as she would have been to leave the room, and take off the rest of her wet things, she could not, situated as she was, move without exposure. Helen's signals were dreadful to her. Only on one occasion had she braved them before, and that was all past and forgiven. She had returned to her allegiance.

Why would Helen not understand? She coughed, and looked expressively at Colonel Aytoun's boots. She remarked, opening her lips for the first time, how very wet they had got when walking. She tried Lily.

All in vain. Helen could stand it no longer. In her heart she was calling her sister a stupid dolt, or some such ugly name; but aloud, she gently suggested that Carry should let papa know.

She did not wish to say it. She was particularly anxious that it should not appear as if she stood in need of him. But the desire for his presence was so strong that have him she must, and Lily she could not spare to be her messenger. Colonel Aytoun would be at her side in a minute, in spite of Philip.

Philip was at a little distance, and so was Carry; and though, as yet, they had not gone into a fresh conspiracy, they might at any moment. In that case she would be, to all intents and purposes, alone with Colonel Aytoun.

This she was resolved against, and held Lily to her side with a grasp of iron.

Lily herself understood perfectly why she was not to go. She was proud of her sister's confidence, and of her position as right hand and support. Both were enraged with Carry, when, in reply to Helen's suggestion, she astounded them by asserting that she was tired, and thought there was no use in going for their father, as she was sure he had not come in.

Miss Tolleton rang the bell without a word, and then it appeared there were to be more blunderers than one.

Corker was but mortal, and though possessed of acute reasoning powers, he reasoned, as the best of mortals do, from analogy. He had seen gentlemen, and gentlemen in that house meant tea. All his former experience in the

family had taught him that afternoon gentlemen and afternoon tea went together. Accordingly the drawing-room bell found him prepared. As soon as it rang, he poured in the boiling water, and brought up the tray.

Muffins were there too, and a hot cake, spicy and odorous. There was even a more brilliant shine on the silver than usual, as it happened to have been his afternoon for cleaning it.

No words can express the disgust of Helen at this apparition.

If Mr Smith should come in now, she felt as if she should have to give him up altogether. Yet she must show nothing.

Corker was ordered to let his master know who was there, and tea was dispensed by the joint agency of the eldest and youngest sister.

By this time Colonel Aytoun had begun to doubt the accuracy of his first hasty conclusion. He could not detect any understanding between Helen and the new-comer. She was still preoccupied, more preoccupied than she had been before the interruption, but he had clearly no interest in her thoughts. They were both absent, yet alert. Both appeared to be on the watch, but neither to be watching the other. He turned his chair the least bit round, and growled a civil remark to Captain Wellwood.

Philip thought it was the dreariest tea he had ever known at Freelands. At the last he had been a good deal amused, and a little put out; but on the whole it was cheerfulness itself compared with this. For years after, the smell of hot cake gave him a sensation of something disagreeable.

What was that fellow doing there? What would Sauffrenden think of it? What would they all? Colonel Aytoun, who was barely tolerated in the house because of his wife, was shunned by the whole party. The poor *T*'s would be in deeper disgrace than ever.

Were it only Sauffrenden himself, he might be talked over; but the Fultons, Mr Smith, and others, were coming to dinner that evening, and if Colonel Aytoun told where he had been, they would all know what to think. Of course he would tell. He would have no reason for reticence on the subject. And he would talk about poor Helen, and get her more slighted than ever. And Mr Smith would

hear. Then in spite of himself, when Mr Smith recurred to his recollection, he smiled in Carry's face. She thought she had said something amusing, and laughed. Her danger was over now, and she had nothing further to fear.

Mr Tolleton did not appear for fully ten minutes. He would have given something not to come in at all. He knew who was there quite well. He had known it all along—having crept stealthily past the drawing-room door directly after Colonel Aytoun had been ushered within.

He had not known a minute's peace, for fear he should be sent for, until Captain Wellwood came. Then he had settled himself down with an easy mind, and begun to change his things for the evening.

Helen's summons was as unexpected as it was unwelcome. But he knew, when he got it, that he must go. And unwillingly, after delaying as long as he could, he went.

It certainly did not appear as if he were wanted. Scarcely had he shaken hands, when the first visitor rose to go.

He appealed to Philip, and Philip thought it best to accede. He could do no good by remaining, and he wished to hear if the call would be acknowledged on their return to the Castle.

With a sigh of relief, the others saw them depart.

Helen set her lips together as the door shut.

"Now," said she, "*that*, I hope, will never happen again."

"Well," said her sister, "I thought we managed wonderfully well."

"Did you, my dear?" inquired her father, with unwonted tenderness in his voice. "Did *you*, Helen? I knew I should only make a mess of it, if I came in; so I stayed away till you sent for me. But I am afraid my coming did no good."

"The greatest good it could have done, papa, by sending them away. But, Carry, how could you not go when I told you to go for papa? And you saw I wanted it long before I spoke, too. I particularly wished not to speak. I showed you as plainly as possible; but you are such a——"

"How could *you* not remember my boot?" cried the outraged Carry, interrupting. "As if I could possibly

have got up and walked across the room with only one boot on, and not even a long gown! I never felt so uncomfortable in my life! You might have known I should never have refused without a reason for it, and not have asked me out before them all!"

"I declare, I forgot all about your boot," said Helen, who had now the worst of it. "That comes of your untidy ways. I suppose you could not help it, however; but why did you not give me the hint?"

"I did. I gave you a hundred hints, but you would not take them. I stared at Colonel Aytoun's boots, till he thought there was something the matter with them, and kept peeping down himself. And I said how wet we had got, and——"

"Never mind! never mind!" cried her father, impatiently. "What is all this about boots? What does it signify what Colonel Aytoun's boots were? He never had good ones, because he would go to Wilson's. Wilson can't make boots. But what I want to know is, how you managed—how you did with him—eh, Helen?"

"Oh, quite as well as could have been expected, papa; but he is not a nice man to have to deal with. I wish with all my heart we had never met him."

"Did he—eh? I suppose he reverted—eh? Was there anything unpleasant?"

"Well, we had a good deal that was not pleasant, certainly; but on the whole we had by far the best of it. I let it appear that I had been such a child at the Abbey, that he, and it too, had almost passed from my memory."

"My dear! in four years!"

"Four years means a long time to a girl, papa. Besides, of course, it was a pretence, and he saw through it; but it was the only thing that stopped him. I brought it to bear at every turn. I think if I had tried, I could not have hit on anything that would have hurt his vanity more; and I did like that. Oh, that door-bell! I thought, of course, it was Mr Smith!"

"So did I!" exclaimed the other two, simultaneously.

"I never was so glad to see Philip before."

"Philip was the angel of light this time," said Lily, laughing. "And as for Colonel Aytoun, he might have been a study for *his* portrait. An angel of darkness him

self could not have given a better scowl than the one with which he saluted Philip."

"I am sure Philip gave it him back again," said Carry, who had seen wonders from her post of observation.

"Well, the danger is over for this time," said Helen, with another sigh. "But mind, Lily, while he is here, you never leave the hall-door open again."

CHAPTER XX.

BEND, STURDY OAK!

It would have been difficult for Helen to say why she talked of the danger; or perhaps we ought to say, why she talked of it as being over.

Colonel Aytoun was no longer dangerous to her in the way of attraction, and if he attempted reproaches, would get as good as he gave.

If the danger lay in his mischief-making between her and Mr Smith, it was assuredly not over. He had escaped meeting him at Freelands, it is true, but he would meet him elsewhere—at Sauffrenden, perhaps; and then, if they were spoken about, it was very probable that he might find out everything. She little knew how unlikely it was that they should be spoken about at Sauffrenden.

But the truth was, Helen hardly knew what she was saying. The repulsion with which Colonel Aytoun's presence now inspired her was so great that she could scarcely bear it. The touch of his hand chilled her. To catch his eye made her shrink. She could not despise what she so much detested, but she did marvel that she could ever have admired such a man.

His person had grown older; and the savage temper which blandishments could hardly hide at any time, was now stamped upon his face.

His manner to herself, too, how shameful, how degrading! The mocking voice which had called her a valuable example, and the sneer which underlay the assertion that she had been kind to him.

It is a dreadful thing for a woman, with any womanly feeling, to see herself not respected; and there was not common respect, nor the commonest appearance of it, in Colonel Aytoun's manner.

When he grew angry he had taunted her. When his taunts apparently fell harmless, he had only grown more unscrupulous in making use of them.

It was very well for her to say, and with truth, to her father and sisters, that she had the best of it. It was a triumph she would fain have been spared. It was one of those victories in which the bloodshed is greatest on the conqueror's side.

In her earlier days, the days of her hoydenhood, it might not have been felt to this extent. She might even have considered such a war of wits an amusing pastime; and instead of contenting herself with defence, boldly carried the campaign into the enemy's country. In these wars she had invariably the best of it, as Mrs Hunt and many others knew to their cost. But a hand-to-hand fight with Colonel Aytoun was different. His touch was pollution—his presence a defiling thing. When she was rid of him, she might be excused if, hardly knowing what she said, she called it the "danger."

The sisters were now necessarily condemned either to the house or to their own grounds, which were not extensive.

To be sure there was the short cut; but by frequenting it, reports might get abroad of an understanding between them and Mr Smith. Everything that would encourage these must be given up for a while. They even hoped he would not come to Freelands.

Carry and Lily, having seen Colonel Aytoun, were almost as anxious as their sister to avoid another meeting. They never should know how to answer him as Helen did, and agreed that he had a horrid smile, and a malevolent eye. Besides which, he had paid them no attention, and had looked older than they expected.

"I told you that," said Helen. "He is fifty if he is a day. I rather suspect he is a year or two older."

"But I did not think he would look it. I imagined a tall, dark, melancholy-looking man, a sort of Don Juan."

"You could not have hit him off better, Lily."

"Oh no, he is not my ideal at all."

"So that is your ideal?"

"Yes, quite. To tell you the truth, I had rather prepared my mind to be captivated with your *bête noire*."

"Captivated!"

"Well, I'm not; so you need not look like that. For one thing he stooped, and his eyebrows were too thick; but the worst was, I am certain he had false teeth. I heard them rattle in his mouth—I know I did; and after that, I could have snapped my fingers at him."

"You had better not, Lily."

"Oh, I shall do nothing rash; I did not mean that. Only that I did wonder how you could ever have cared to go on with a man of that age."

"I am not particular as to age. For that matter, older men are often far more dangerous than the very young ones. *They* are so soft. Just like the young trees, tender and sappy, the least thing kills them. But I like to say, 'Bend, sturdy oak!'" cried the saucy girl, in her triumph.

"It was a good thing that fancy took you just when Mr Smith came," rejoined Lily. "You are bending him, or I am mistaken."

"And it takes all my strength, and that is what I like. He gives way a little, inclines on one side; I think I will have him down, and lo! he is upright again with a spring."

"Every stroke tells, however," said Lily, carrying on the metaphor.

Helen smiled. "I think he is beginning to show signs of wear. The resistance is getting feebler. Courage, Helen! 'One struggle more'—how does it go on?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Lily; "that is not the meaning at all. But I like your oak. I don't know why it should be, but I like him better after to-day. He rises by comparison with Colonel Aytoun. At least there is nothing false about him, and he has such a much pleasanter voice."

Helen was very much pleased. A concession so great as this could hardly have been looked for from the volatile Lily. She slipped her arm within her sister's and began to talk of Mr Smith more seriously than she had ever done before.

"You see, Lily, I really do like him. He is very pleasant. He is as kind as he can be. He would allow me

to have my own way in everything, and we should have such fun up there. I am sure I should never feel the least inclined to do anything he disliked. I would be as good to him as possible. And his plans and his cottages—it is really very nice of him, and quite the right thing for a country gentleman. He gets on so well with everybody, too. Look how he got into the Sauffrenden's set at once, and the Lorrimers are his great friends; and these Aytouns who ask nobody, they had him at the Abbey. Every one seems to like Mr Smith."

"Yes," Lily agreed, doubtfully; and barely remembered in time, not to add, "It is very strange," before her sister.

The truth of the statement she could not deny. But she felt it was a curious mystery, of which the most curious part was Nelly's own share in it.

But how charming it would be to feel really rich! They were very short of money just then at Freelands. The mourning for their grandmother had cost more than she left them; and though, to do the girls justice, they made their funds go further than many would, the bills were heavy.

Their income was not large; Mr Tolleton's fortune being invested so that it yielded only a small though safe return. It was tied up for his daughters. He was not at liberty to touch it, or alter its disposal.

The spacious mansion of the Hill, with its air of wealthy luxurious calm, had greatly impressed Helen. She was not a foolish girl, and where money was not to be had, contrived to do without it. She had never run into debt, and kept her sisters out of it likewise. But she dearly loved the things which money could purchase. Her very abstemiousness at present gave her a double zest for them.

She longed to go out into the world; to see, and be seen; to travel, in pretty travelling dresses, from one fashionable spot to the other. Further, she desired adventure, she panted after freedom and emancipation. Mr Smith's having shown a roving taste had been two-thirds in his favour.

Then, when at home, she had a fancy for bright little pony-carriages, and a supple hunter to carry her out, the admiration of the field. Of course, as Mr Smith did not hunt, she could not follow the hounds either. That pros-

pect must be relinquished; but she would be able to dally round the meet, to show herself at the breakfast, to get snatches of the sport by many a little turn and by-path.

All this, if need be, she could go without. Had she not been the one to insist on laying down the carriage, when, at the beginning of the winter, one horse had died and the other had been obliged to be shot?

People had almost pitied the Tolletons then.

But the girls made so light of their misfortune, and looked so healthy and handsome walking about in their bright-coloured petticoats, that the pity died out.

They were known to be fond of riding, but no one ever offered them a mount. They walked when they went to make their calls. They walked to church in all weathers.

Lord Sauffrenden alone felt for them. Captain Wellwood, who trudged many a mile to save his own beautiful pair, saw no hardship in it. Mr Smith knew nothing of the matter. Dr Hunt thought it did them all the good in the world.

As the sisters talked confidentially over Helen's prospects, on that Christmas eve, they spoke of their loss.

"It would be a comfort to have a carriage again," said Lily. "I wonder how many Mr Smith has."

"I have seen two, and a gig, and I think there is a pony-carriage in the stables."

"How did you find out that?"

"I forget how. Not from himself; the Hunts, I think. By the way, I wonder if Maria is learning to drive yet. Oh, Lily, I always forgot to tell you of our visit to the Hunts the day of the snow-storm. Colonel Aytoun put it out of my head. It was papa's idea. It was to make sure that the doctor had paid his visit. Now, what do you think is the new alarm? We are disposed of, but a formidable antagonist has arisen in the shape of Miss Fulton. Poor Miss Fulton! Imagine her feelings if she knew she was regarded as the rival of Maria Hunt! It appears, however, that Miss Fulton is the wife the Sauffrendens have looked out for Mr Smith, and beyond a doubt, the most suitable one that has been thought of yet. If it had not been for one single objection, she is the very person I should have fixed upon, myself."

"But I suppose," said Lily, slowly, "that there is nothing in it?"

"Do you wish to know what he thinks of her? She talks too loud, and too fast, and too much."

"She may talk him into marrying her, for all that."

Helen smiled proudly. "I don't think you would be afraid, if you had heard the rest. There was a very pretty distinction drawn between her and your dear sister. I do like Mr Smith. I like his way of saying things. I like the fun of having them all after him, and knowing what I know, all the time. Not but what I exonerate Cornelia."

"Yes," said Lily, "she is too mad to do anything half so sane."

"It is the Admiral, of course. But there the Hunts were, all in a fever about it. What might be Miss Fulton's age? Had she not grown much older-looking lately? Was she not obliged to go about very shabby? Were not things at the Hall all gone to rack and ruin? This was all, as it were, in joke, you know. She would make an excellent wife for Mr Smith, would she not? If only he could fancy her. The misfortune was, that old bachelors never did take to sensible, experienced women; they fancied silly, frolicky girls, who would plague their lives out. Poor Miss Fulton! They hoped she was not building upon it. They heard she and the Admiral had been very assiduous. It would be a sad pity if she laid herself out to catch him, and so forth. You have no idea how absurd the whole scene was. I was treasuring up every word; and then, after all, it went out of my head."

"But what did you say?"

"Of course I gave the idea every encouragement; that is to say, I affected to disbelieve every word of it. Nothing of the sort had ever reached our ears, and we should surely have heard if there had been any grounds for it. I imagined any danger to Mr Smith's heart lay *nearer home*. But, all the time, I took care they should have no real grounds for disbelief to rest on. We talked of nothing else the whole visit, for every time I said I was *sure* there was nothing, I laid such an emphasis on the *sure*, that it was quite enough to turn the scales. People don't say they are *sure* of things, unless they are not. Poor folks! What

geese they did make of themselves. I think even Mr Smith would have thought it fair to show them up."

"He would have enjoyed it immensely."

"I don't know that he would."

"Why, he is not a prig, whatever he may be."

"Without being a prig, he is the most straightforward man I ever knew. If he ever should be anything to me, I mean to take a lesson from him how to behave myself better."

"I think the lessons have begun already, Nelly. You are always wondering what he would say to this and that. Next time you are in difficulties, you had better go to him for advice."

It was spoken in jest, but her sister saw no jest in it. Had she had any difficulties to contend against, unconnected with the difficulty of marrying him, she would have asked his advice before that of any one else she knew. When in his society, she had that delightful sense of being regarded with favour, which dissipates fear. She felt invariably that he was conscious of her presence. Did she move from one chair to another—he was looking. Did she talk to others—he was listening. She was the one person in the room for him. Her conquest, so far, had been easy, but it was not yet complete. She thought of Colonel Aytoun, and felt it might never be completed.

CHAPTER XXI.

SKATING

MANY days now passed in the same monotonous manner.

Christmas Day and New-Year's Day went by, and nothing occurred to stir up the people of Eastworld. If the party at Sauffrenden were having a merry time, none of their mirth, at any rate, extended itself beyond the Castle walls.

The Aytouns, if still there, must have paid a visit of at least a fortnight's duration, and it was reasonable to suppose it must be nearly at an end. So argued Lily Tolleton; and she enforced the certainty with all the weighty reasoning,

which a hard frost and a glorious skating day could suggest.

It was too tiresome this being shut out from the world. Why should they not break loose for once, and all three adjourn to the meadows? Everybody would be there, and if Colonel Aytoun was, it could not be helped. But, at the same time, she was sure he would not. "Listen, Nelly. Ten days is a proper Christmas visit, and they have been there a fortnight. We know there is no love lost between them and the Sauffrendens, and it is most unlikely that the very first time they have come at all, they would stay long."

Helen was not equally certain of this. If Colonel Aytoun wished to stay, he would stay. He was no observer of etiquette. Then her sister put forth a still more forcible argument. He had never repeated his call at Freelands. Helen herself had been confident that if he remained in the neighbourhood he would be there again ere long.

She admitted the truth of this, and owned that as each day had closed in peace, she had breathed a sigh of relief. Still she would not go to the meadows, herself. If they liked to go, it was different. There might be no harm in that; and soon she had talked herself into the belief that there might even be good. She was growing hungry for news.

All the time they were dressing she gave instructions. They were, if possible, to avoid speaking to Colonel Aytoun, but to take every means of ascertaining whether he were on the ice or not. If not, to discover if he had quitted the neighbourhood. If they actually met face to face, they were to tell him (in answer, of course, only to inquiry) that she had a headache, and was confined to her own room.

If Mr Smith were on the meadows, they were to come across him by accident, but not to remain in his company more than a few minutes. "He will be easily skated away from!" interposed Lily.

"You had better not boast too soon," replied her sister. "He has spent winters in Holland on purpose to enjoy it."

She then resumed the leading-strings.

They were to go up to Miss Clay, and be very civil;

and not forget to ask after Mrs Rodney and the baby—the baby was a girl.

With Philip Wellwood they might flirt as much as they pleased.

These were the chief instructions of the embassy. In addition, they were to keep their eyes and ears open, to learn anything more that was to be learnt, either about the Hunts or Miss Fulton, and to note what guests were among the Castle party.

All these duties the sisters faithfully undertook to discharge, to the best of their ability, and set off in high spirits for the rendezvous.

Miss Tolleton then bolted herself into her room; and Corker received the usual intimation from the ladies, with their hats and cloaks on, that they were "not at home."

With this reply he went prepared to answer the door-bell about an hour after the house was quiet.

"Miss Tolleton is at home, I know," rejoined the inquirer—the same who had set aside his refusal of admittance, before. "Be so good as take her my card."

Without hesitation, the butler accepted the card. He was accustomed to this sort of thing. The drawing-room was empty, but he sent it up-stairs by a maid.

"I knew it!" said Helen, breathing heavily as the light tap came to her door. "He has come straight off here. Yes, I will come, Thompson."

Thompson presented the card.

"Tell him I am sorry, but I cannot see any one to-day. I am obliged to stay in my room, having a headache."

Would he go, or would he not? If not, he should have a plainer answer still; but she felt that if that light tap were to come again, she would not unbolt the door; it would be too unsafe.

Three or four minutes' suspense, then a rustle, and then it came.

"I cannot get up again, Thompson. What is it?"

"If you please, Miss," came a voice that was alternately a loud whisper and a low growl, "it's the gentleman saying he thought as how you would see him perhaps, as he came on business."

"No power on earth shall make me see him," said Helen to herself, her spirit rising. "I can't. I cannot; and

more than that, I will not. All along I felt this was coming. Thompson!"

"Yes, Miss; I am here."

"Go down and see the gentleman yourself, and tell him, without any more excuses, that I cannot see him. Just those words, and no more."

Another five minutes elapsed after the maid's departure, and then the sound of footsteps beneath the window told that her second errand had sped

Although the blind was down, the window was open, and Miss Tolleton wished her room had not looked to the front. She held her breath; so loud, so near, sounded the heavy tramp upon the gravel. In another minute she had crept to the window, and peered behind the screen. He was at the gate. She was just in time to see him close it, then stand a moment, and look steadfastly towards the house.

What was in his mind?

Carry and Lily came home full of gossip. Colonel Aytoun had accosted them on their very first appearance at the meadows. He had come across the ice, shaken hands with both, and immediately inquired after their sister. Lily had answered him according to all that Helen had said, and he had hardly waited to hear her out ere he started off along the road, bound, no doubt, for Freelands.

As Helen had vowed not to leave her room, and Corker had received instructions, it had not occasioned them the least anxiety; and they had even amused themselves by imagining the reception he would have, as they watched his long back hurrying down the road.

Mr Smith had also asked after Miss Tolleton; but on hearing of her indisposition had merely expressed regret, and remained where he was.

"We fully expected to see him set off too," said Lily. "If there had been any more friends of yours on the ice, I should certainly have despatched them all up. Mr Smith was lukewarm, decidedly lukewarm, Nelly. He went on skating with the utmost composure. He performed the vine directly after, without a stumble."

"Do you mean that he was doing figures?" said Helen, with interest.

"Yes, indeed—a little stiffly, but still far better than any one else. There were no really good skaters there."

"Did you see nothing of Philip?"

"Only in the distance, going down a slide with Lord Sauffrenden, and all the boys in the village. Lord Sauffrenden got knocked down once or twice, and each time we heard Philip's great 'Haw! haw!' coming across the ice. You know his laugh. He only laughs about twice a-year, and then it is like thunder."

"He didn't come up to you?"

"No; he pretended not to see us. They were having great fun, and I don't think he wanted to be troubled. We skated several times round them."

"If I had been there," thought Helen, "I think he would have come."

"At last he walked off with Mr Smith," concluded Lily.

"Did he? Where could they be going? To the Hill?"

"Yes; I think so, at least. I heard Philip call out something about ten o'clock, and one of the men touched his hat. I suppose he has gone to dine there."

"And what about Miss Fulton?" inquired Helen.

Oh, Miss Fulton! Lily had a fund of information and merriment about Miss Fulton. The way she and the Admiral had borne down on Mr Smith, the way Mr Smith had sailed away from them, the way the Admiral had hobbled round on his gouty leg, and caught him up again; and best of all, the way Cornelia had joined with him, and smiled, and chatted, and pursued from point to point; yet doing it all in such evident innocence and unconsciousness, that it was a treat to watch her.

The Hunts, however, who were incapable of understanding such a happy state of mind, had been wild with jealousy. They too had tried to chase down Mr Smith, but not with equal success. Lily thought he had never even spoken to them, but Carry corrected her. He had; he had stayed with them about five minutes, but after that she was certain he had been keeping out of their way.

Mrs Hunt, with a fierce, anxious face, had hauled the two hither and thither, and kept them standing by the side till they must have been half frozen, but all to no end. They were still there when the Tolletons had left, the girls looking sulky and rather ashamed. Miss Clay had been left in their charge by her brother-in-law, and Mrs Hunt

had appeared to be somewhat consoled by this attention, though Lily affirmed that even Maria and Clare looked respectable by the side of Miss Clay, who had got herself up a perfect fright.

The first rush of the incoming tide having now subsided, Helen was at liberty to dilate upon what had happened at home, which she did with animation.

The bell, the voices, the light tap at the door, were graphically portrayed. The suspense between the first and second appearance of the maid,—the crunching footstep on the gravel—the look backwards from the gate,—all in turn were dwelt upon.

"Don't you think it was a pity to send so very plain a message?" said Lily, prudent for once.

"I knew it was at the time; but it was the only thing I could do. If I had had any other excuse—but, however, it was better to stick to one. No, the headache did very well. He ought not to have shown he did not believe in it. But it was just like him."

"What do you think he will do now?"

"Nothing, if we can keep him at a distance. The only way is to defy boldly, when you are driven into a corner."

"I was so disappointed," said Carry, in her slow way. "I thought I heard him tell Miss Fulton that they were going on Saturday. I thought I should have that to tell. And she said she was so glad. 'So I'm sure am I!' I thought. But the next moment it turned out to be not the Aytouns going, but the Lorrimers coming."

"You stupid!" said Helen, laughing. "How could you imagine she would tell Colonel Aytoun she was glad he was going?"

"Of course," said Carry, warmly, "I knew she ought not to say it, but she is so odd. I put it down to that."

"Carry would never have said it herself," said Lily, looking at her.

"Of course not," rejoined Carry again. "How could you ever think I should? I never say rude things like that. Nobody knows better than I what I am about, though you and Helen don't think so. I can answer better than either of you when I choose."

"It's a pity you don't choose oftener then," said Lily, drily.

CHAPTER XXII.

HE HAD GUESSED THE INDUCEMENT

When Colonel Aytoun looked back after closing the gate at Freelands, he was not hurling imprecations on the head of its inhabitant, nor even vowing eternal vengeance. In these days such magnificent sensations are unusual.

But, nevertheless, there was working within his bosom a feeling, which with care might have been nursed into a very respectable thirst for revenge. He longed to pay her out. He had never been treated so in his life before. He said to himself that no woman had ever yet turned her back upon him.

Strange as this might seem if true, it was true after a fashion.

So short a time did he allow to elapse before his affections fell from warm to freezing-point, that it was scarcely possible for any one to anticipate him.

On first acquaintance he was charming; and he never declined—he jumped from one extreme to the other. One day lying at a fair one's feet, the next walking off in another direction. But Helen had been an exception to this rule, from the beginning of his acquaintance with her. Her beauty had caught his eye. Her ready wit amused his fancy. And the freedom from restraint, and fearlessness of the world's criticism, which, joined to the ignorance of motherless seventeen, had made her ready to learn whatever he taught, and willing to obey whatever he ordered, had completed the charm.

That she had burst away from him in a rage was rather stimulating than otherwise. He had not wearied of her, and he had not done with her. He had brought his wife to Sauffrenden on purpose to renew his acquaintance with her, for the unhappy Emmeline was his only key of entrance there. She had been made to write and propose the visit; and when it was accepted he had grimly jested with her in the satisfaction of his heart.

To be met thus!

Looked at, spoken to, like a serpent deprived at once of

its charm and its sting. And the end! Turned from the door, because, forsooth, his importunity was too troublesome, his company too insipid. Miss Tolleton was fatigued with admiration, his was altogether superfluous.

His vanity, however, would not long permit him to take this view of the case. It is difficult to sustain painful thoughts of ourselves for any length of time. Any other interpretation, any other solution of the enigma, would be welcome.

He thought of Philip. But the more he thought of him the more his conviction amounted to an instinct that he was not the man. Whoever it was, it was not he. That being the case, Philip might be made of use in discovering to him who it was.

He regretted that he had not cultivated Captain Wellwood's goodwill. A fellow who gave himself such confounded airs was not likely to be brought round in a hurry. He might be tried, but could not be depended upon.

On a sudden he recollected Sir George Lorrimer. Sir George was at present unknown to him, but he and Lady Lorrimer were expected at the Castle in a few days, and their acquaintance could be assiduously sought. Now that he was prepared beforehand he would use all his powers of ingratiation. It mattered not who or what sort of person he was; he would take colour by him, and attain the coveted information. Sir George, he was aware, had been in the neighbourhood before, and probably knew all about Miss Tolleton.

Lord Sauffrenden, before he went to the ice, sent his portmanteau to the station, intending to run up to London for a few days, and have, as he told his wife, a breath of fresh air, before inhaling more of his guest's society.

In his own house he said to himself he could not be bad to Colonel Aytoun; and though this being bad simply meant with him coming short of the veriest extreme of brotherly kindness, still it made him constrained and uncomfortable.

He was not enjoying his Christmas, and at last determined in cowardly fashion to run away from it.

As for Milly, she need have nothing to do with Aytoun. If she and Emmeline and Mary Percy kept together there was no fear of their being molested. The obnoxious guest

had gone through his usual stages with all three, although in the case of Lady Sauffrenden the preliminary stage had been very brief, for her being his wife's cousin and steady friend had developed the second prematurely.

But Milly cared not a jot for him.

As soon as her "Good morning" had been bowed across the breakfast-table, she ignored his existence for the rest of the day. She had nothing to be afraid of, nothing to be ashamed of, nothing in her life past and present which all the world might not pry into. What was Colonel Aytoun to her? A man she would not have had seen at her house but for poor dear Emmeline's sake.

Yes, Sauffrenden might go if he chose. If she had been in his place very likely she would have done the same; and she quite agreed with him as to the propriety of putting Rosamond off till after the Aytouns had left.

This was Lord Sauffrenden's business in town. He was to see his sister, and advise her to postpone her visit till they were free.

"I shall tell her that, of course; we can't turn them away as long as they choose to say," said he; "though it's the last Christmas I shall catch myself having them here, spoiling our whole party. It has been a perfect marplot."

"Poor Emmy! I am glad for her sake, however," said Millicent, tenderly. "You have no idea how nice she is, Sauffrenden. And she seems quite a different creature when she is out alone with Mary and me. She laughs and talks, and gets such a colour. And then she comes down to dinner all cold and dead again, as if he had withered her up. Fancy what it must be to be alone with him! She said to me yesterday she did hope we could put up with them for a very little longer, she did not know when she had enjoyed herself so much. Those were her words."

"Poor thing! What a brute he is!"

"And you know, she tries to put a good face upon it. I think that is the most touching part," said the proud unemotional little Lady Sauffrenden, with a sudden break in her voice. "I can scarcely bear to hear her poor excuses, and see how she looks to find out if we are taken in by them. She never complains. She talks about the Abbey as if everybody pictured it a happy home instead of a great

prison. I wish you had heard her yesterday, finding out all sorts of reasons why she and I had seen so little of each other, and all the time the one reason as palpable as it could be to both of us."

"Has she any idea why they are staying on?"

"No. I suppose he likes it."

"Don't you tell her then!"

"Tell her? How can I? I don't know myself. What do you mean, Sauffrenden?" all eager and curious now. "What reason is there?"

"Nothing, nothing," shuffling uneasily in his chair.

"Oh, there is, and you know it; I see you do. How could you keep it from me? Come now, you must tell me now. You must, and there's no escape; you must, you must," flying round him, brush in hand. "I have you here, caught, and pinned into a corner. Come, there is no help for it. Now then."

And he had meant to be so discreet!

"I wish you wouldn't ask me, Milly; I may be all wrong. I know nothing about it. It's only Philip."

"Well, what about Philip? Philip is the very man for you; he acts pointer, and then you shoot."

"I can act pointer for myself," said he, offended. "I should hope I am as good as Philip any day. He never discovers half the things I do."

"Yes, yes—I know. Now then, tell me this. What has Philip penetrated into this time—for you have owned yourself this is his affair?"

"He didn't want it spoken about," groaned he.

"You need not be afraid. Who have I to speak to? I promise. There!"

"Oh, hang it! you are such a creature for finding things out!"

"Yes, yes, I am," cried she, with the glee of a child. "I have found out the half already, now for the rest."

There was no escape. Sitting in Milly's room by Milly's fire, in dressing-gown and slippers, how could he be anything but an easy prey?

He had done his best, and now gave in.

Philip's visit and Philip's surmises were unfolded; and however much the revelation might be softened by the veil of charity which the narrator endeavoured to throw over it,

it was still startling. The veil, stretched to its utmost limits, could not cover all; and while they were both agreed in sheltering Philip, they differed in the disposal of the rest. He would fain have hid the luckless *T's*, while she was more willing, or rather less reluctant to screen Colonel Aytoun.

She disliked Emmeline's husband, it is true, but had no past love of him, no present dread of him, to swell her dislike into detestation.

He was all that was bad, she admitted, but one thing more or less matters little when a man is all that is bad; and the first flush of her wrath fell on the Tolletons.

"I knew they had stayed at the Abbey. Emmy told me. She would not even see them, Sauffrenden! She was in her room at the time, but not exactly ill, only kept quiet; and if it had been any one else she would have been only too glad to have had a little company. She was actually sending for her, when Egerton himself advised her not. At least, he spoke in such a way of her that it was quite enough. Yet they stayed a whole fortnight! Of course it was dreadful for Emmy."

"Of course it was. But all the same he took a very easy way of keeping her out of his wife's room."

"Yes; any one could tell that was what he wanted. But no nice girl would have done it."

"Milly, I am not defending her. I never said she was a nice girl, but she was a mere child, and left all to herself."

"Her father was with her."

"You know what he is."

"I do not indeed; I know nothing about him."

"He is the most perfect nonentity. A man like Aytoun would twist him round his finger. I do think you are rather hard on those poor girls, Milly. I do indeed, dear."

This tone always brought Milly to her better mind.

"Do you think I am hard, you dear old fellow! You are so good and nice yourself—I love you all the better for it—but indeed you are too——at least I cannot see things exactly as you do. This Helen Tolleton is no child now; she is at least as old as I am——"

"She is only twenty-one."

"Well, that is but a year younger; though how you came to know it I cannot imagine."

"Oh, I always know people's ages."

"Does Philip find them out for you too?"

"No indeed; it is I who find out for myself. What puts Philip into your head at every turn?"

"Only that I fancied he was very likely to know Miss Tolleton's age."

"That is a mistake, Milly. He doesn't care twopence about her. I have told you so over and over again. He thinks of them exactly as we do."

"But we do not think exactly alike."

Sauffrenden looked disturbed. "I'm sure we do, dear. We do not either of us like them; but I think, and so would you if you thought about it, that in good hands they might be made something of yet."

"But how are they to get into good hands?"

("Mr Smith's hands," thought he, "they could get into fast enough, if they only were let alone.")

"Now you see," pursued Milly, "here is this Egerton finds them out at once. That won't enhance their good reputation."

"No. That is the way of the world, and more particularly the way of the women's world, my dear. A blackguardly fellow goes and calls. The girls are cold to him and snub him, and show him they wish to see his face no more. No harm is thought of *him;* but they—oh! it was shocking of *them!*"

"I should think it was harm enough of him that it should be thought shocking of them," said she, nettled.

"There you are—you always catch one up so. Now I bet you a sovereign they give him the cold shoulder next time he goes. Philip said he was certain from Helen's whole manner that she wished to have done with him."

"And what is the reason of this change of manner?"

"Just what I said. She was a mere child at the Abbey and thought it was good fun to romp with him. Now, she knows better. I mean to go down to the meadows tomorrow, and watch what goes on."

Thus he had closed the conference, and prepared for himself a charming little entertainment at the same time.

So contrary, however, did things turn out on that occasion, that he prudently resolved to say nothing about it on his return from town, and trust to the subjects being forgotten.

He had seen Colonel Aytoun accost the sisters on their first appearance, and he and Philip had looked into each other's faces when immediately afterwards they descried him on the way to Freelands. *She* had remained at home, and he had gone to see her.

Determined not to be left alone after dinner with the obnoxious guest, and unable to run away like Sauffrenden, Philip had hit on the happy idea of Mr Smith, whom the Admiral had lately captured for the fourth time. He made in to the rescue, extracted the prey, and obtained as his reward the coveted invitation.

Lord Sauffrenden told one of his men to let the ladies know, and desired Captain Wellwood to name the hour he would be sent for.

"Why should he be sent for at all?" interposed Mr Smith. "Why should he not keep me company for a day or two while you are away? I am alone. I need him. Come, Captain Wellwood, show yourself good-natured, and have pity on a lonely man."

Philip hesitated.

"You are his only check," said Sauffrenden, in a low voice.

"You are awfully good; but I think, and Lord Sauffrenden thinks, perhaps we can hardly both leave Colonel Aytoun," said Philip to Mr Smith. "He knows he is no favourite already, and it might seem rude. Mrs Aytoun might think it rude."

"Very true," said Mr Smith, hastily. The allusion to Mrs Aytoun pleased him.

"The fact is," said Philip, looking him full in the face, "they are friends of yours, so you know all about it; one could not put up with him a day, if it were not for his wife."

"And you see," added his friend, growing still more confidential, "it's rather shabby to leave Wellwood alone; but I can't stand it any longer. So, if you would go up there to-morrow, and make a third, instead of his coming to you, it would really be awfully kind. But I'm afraid you would hate it."

"Certainly I will go. But to be as frank with you as you are with me, Colonel Aytoun is no friend of mine."

"Of course he is not, sir," said Lord Sauffrenden, warmly. "No one would ever suppose that he could be.

The greatest beast I ever knew in my life. His very being in a house brings it into bad odour. The moment it was known he was here we got nothing but excuses from everybody. Spoilt our whole party and everything. But—well, his wife is my wife's cousin, and, poor thing, a sad time she has of it at home, so we ought not to grudge her a holiday. They may stay as long as they like; but I won't have my sister here with them, and that's why I am going up to town. What is his inducement to stay, I am sure I cannot imagine."

It was one of Lord Sauffrenden's peculiarities that whenever he was nervous, or taken by surprise, he, in the common phrase, lied like a hatter. Nothing could stop him, and nothing could cure him, for he did it spontaneously and unconsciously.

It had just occurred to him to wonder what Mr Smith would feel if he discovered, or even suspected, the object of Colonel Aytoun's present pursuit; and being immediately thrown into confusion by the idea, he took as naturally to subterfuge as a rabbit to its hiding-place.

Philip understood, and it amused him. But the smile died away from his lips as he saw that Mr Smith looked impenetrably grave.

He had guessed the inducement.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AFTER DINNER.

Mr Smith had asked the curate to join him and Philip a dinner, but the invitation had been reluctantly declined. Mr Rodney would have liked very much to accept, but it was Wednesday, and he never dined out on Wednesdays. The two gentlemen were therefore alone.

Dinner being over, they drew their chairs round a blazing and crackling wood-fire; having a small table, with the decanters on it, between them. It was very comfortable, very quiet, very warm; and, to tell the truth, the wine was very good.

Two more temperate men—temperate in neither going to

one extreme nor the other—did not exist; but they each knew what good wine was.

They were troubled in spirit and cast down, and the wine comforted them. They had been walking, running, standing, and skating all day long in the sharp air, and the wine revived them. They sank back in their easy-chairs, watching the play of fire-light on the polished steel; listening to the monotonous drone of the black cat purring, as she stretched herself full length, and nestled into the shaggy fringes of the Turkey rug, hooking it with her claws, and rubbing against it her sleepy head; and as they gently sipped the nectar, a spirit of resignation and contentment stole over them.

The afternoon had been filled with dull forebodings, disagreeable and dim revelations. Each had felt depressed, scarcely knowing why, unless it were that Colonel Aytoun's company was like a nightmare. To get away from him was in itself a relief. Philip breathed a sigh of satisfaction as he thought of his escape.

Here there was calm, peace, and rest. Mr Smith—yes, Lady Sauffrenden might say what she liked of him now—he was the best of fellows, and his wine was superlative.

Soon they grew confidential. It was easy to introduce the subject which in common filled their minds. Colonel Aytoun seemed a great way off from that quiet crimson-curtained room shut in by its barrier of frosty gloom outside.

From confiding in each other what they thought of him, what they had heard of him, and what they believed of him, it gradually became clear that each wished to discover if the other had anything to fear from him.

Mr Smith when, through Lord Sauffrenden's blunder, he guessed the inducement, had guessed it with a startling certainty.

It became to him a fact. He did not think, nor feel sure—he *knew* why Colonel Aytoun stayed.

The knowledge gave him unaccountable pain, he would have said, for Emmeline's sake. To have Emmeline slighted, degraded, before them all—to know that her wretched life was still embittered by fresh miseries—was it not enough to cause even such a pang as had shot through his heart, when with a flash of light the whole stood revealed before his eyes?

It was, it was; and yet—oh, shame to think of!—it was not Emmeline's image, it was not Emmeline's name, which had made the bitterness of that bitter moment. He had never once thought of her.

Had Captain Wellwood discovered this?

"Our friend," Philip presently began, "was talking last night in his usual free strain of the eldest Miss Tolleton. It appears they met at Sauffrenden in the old time, and he seems by no means to have forgotten it."

"I knew they were acquainted. Has—have they met lately?"

"He called on them last week. I happened to look in at the same time."

There was a pause—the same thought in both of their minds. "And he went there to-day."

"I think, Captain Wellwood," said the host at length, breaking the silence in an uneasy voice, "that you are a friend of these ladies. If it be a fair question, and you can excuse my putting it, do you consider he is forcing his company on them against their inclination?"

Here was a dilemma. A week ago he would have answered for them that such was the case. He could have testified from personal observation that they showed no desire for Colonel Aytoun's society. They had betrayed, he would have confidently affirmed, the very reverse.

But again, he had seen with his own eyes on this same day that of which he knew not what to think. Two opposite lights had been shed on the matter. Which was the true, and which the false?

He began slowly.

"That question, sir, is one I should have liked to put to you. I don't know what to think, for my part. The reception he met with, the day I was there, was anything but encouraging; but then, you see, my being there or not there might make all the difference. Miss Tolleton is no doubt very handsome and charming; but between ourselves she has more of the cunning of the serpent than the innocence of the dove. There is no saying what tricks she might be up to."

Was there more of the cunning or the innocence in this speech? If the former, it answered.

"She is incapable of tricks," said Mr Smith.

Not even an arch of the eyebrows escaped from his companion. Not a syllable, not a look of surprise. He gravely sipped his claret, and if he smiled he turned the smile inwards.

"She is incapable of tricks," pursued her champion, warmly; "but, as you say, circumstances will alter manners. Colonel Aytoun is a man whom it is better to conciliate than to offend, and Miss Tolleton is——is a model of discretion."

The smile must have turned inwards again. Captain Wellwood replied, "Certainly."

"It is not every one," pursued Mr Smith, "who knows the sort of man he is; and his manner to ladies is——"

"Just so—beastly."

His friend laughed. "I was going to say most taking, most engaging, but the other is perhaps quite as appropriate, in fact they are reconcilable. How can you expect them not to be taken in by it?"

"She would not be that," said Philip, shortly. "Miss Tolleton is not so easily taken in; but I should like to be sure she did not fancy him in spite of all."

"In spite of all?"

"Oh, she knows well enough what he is," impatiently. "It is patent to all the world. The thing is not, does she know, but does she care?"

"Care?"

"Some girls are not particular. Miss Tolleton is fancy free; she would enjoy a spicy sort of romance far more than a humdrum commonplace attachment."

Was this mocking voice Philip's? Was this sneering blabbing fool himself? What possessed him? A demon of mischief, or a demon of malice? The moment passed, and he was himself again.

Mr Smith looked like a man who had received a blow.

His hand shook as he raised the wine-glass to his lips, and his voice was gone. It was not for several minutes that he had sufficiently mastered himself to be able to reply, and then the tone as he spoke made his companion painfully aware of his indiscretion.

"Perhaps you are right. She is very young; she has—no one else. There is one other thing I should like to say, and then we will close the subject. Did—I feel as if

I ought hardly to ask it, but it is impossible for any one knowing Colonel Aytoun as I do, not to be anxious about his admission to the house of any friend—did he go there to-day?"

"Yes."

Yes, he had gone; gone to seek and find her alone. Perhaps she had permitted him, perhaps she had even sent to him. An idea to be repudiated, yet, alas! not finally. Thrust it out as often as he would, it rose and looked him in the face again.

Could it, could it, *could* it be?

Yet was it not cruel, after all, to cast a reflection upon her? Captain Wellwood had done so, and he had listened. He felt as if they were both traitors. They had no right, no warrant for such suspicions. They were condemning unheard—striking in the dark.

His anger rose against Philip.

With inexpressible comfort he scattered his testimony to the winds, and scorned his base insinuations. One moment he had faltered, but now he knew better. He said to himself that he at least would be no false friend; he would be true and firm, let who would flinch from her side.

When Captain Wellwood had left he thought over a plan of action.

He would speak to her. He was no longer young; he might have been, had Emmeline been his wife, the father of girls nearly as old as she. He knew the man whose foul name might compromise hers ere she was aware, and knew him as hardly any others did. Tales might be spread which would never reach her ears—she, so bright, beautiful, guileless, thinking no evil, and seeing no danger.

A shadowy phantom, subtle and gracious, stole into the seat beside him. Two liquid eyes appealed to his. A murmuring voice, a whisper too wonderful, too intoxicating for reality, filled his ear.

His breath came and went; he heard, but did not believe. He dared not speak; he could not move; a spell was on all his senses. She touches him; she bids him know it is not a dream. A marvellous thing has come to pass. Her hand is placed in his. He falls on his knees before her. "Oh, Helen, Helen!"

Thump, bump, tumble over and over. The entrancing

vision flies. Mr Smith has fallen off the sofa, the clock strikes eleven, and the fire is nearly out.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SECOND WALK TO THE VIEW.

When one's mind is made up to a thing, it is wonderful how soon the idea of it becomes familiar.

Mr Smith had no sooner decided on speaking to Miss Tolleton on the subject of Colonel Aytoun, than, instead of feeling it a burdensome duty, his repugnance to undertaking it vanished altogether.

At first he had, it is true, shrunk from the suggestion. It would be interfering; it would be indelicate. She would be fully justified in resenting such a liberty.

But other thoughts soon made their way. She would at least prize the motives which prompted the caution, and she would most certainly reap the benefit.

Satisfied of this, it would be paltry, cowardly, in him to withhold it.

The next point was, how to get the caution imparted.

Of course he could expose Colonel Aytoun before the whole party, and in such general terms as to leave out entirely any allusion to their acquaintance with him.

But he did not relish this mode of treatment. It was unsatisfactory, and might do more harm than good. Already he pictured to himself Helen silent, with pursed lips, Carry uncomprehending, and Lily vociferating volleys of interrogation. Nothing probably would be gained. He could not make assertions which he was not ready to prove if required, and how could he do that in the presence of a whole party? Besides, it would be an odd, unnatural, ill-mannered thing to do. He could not get up and suddenly denounce an old friend, as they believed him to be, without any sort of introduction to the subject. And if there were — which it was perhaps possible there might be — any shadow of truth in Captain Wellwood's hints, to the extent merely that she had been blinded by the opening address

of this accomplished deceiver, why, of course, it would be the very way to rouse every generous feeling in his behalf. It is never safe to turn against the absent.

To speak to the father with the knowledge he now had of that father's want of influence, he felt to be useless.

Mr Tolleton would go to his daughters—give his garbled version of the interview—set them all wild against Mr Smith, and in favour of Colonel Aytoun. Instead of anything being gained by this course, all would be lost. It would be worse than the other.

One course only, then, was left open. He must speak to Helen, and speak to her alone.

If necessary, if she proved incredulous, or perhaps even if she needed no such confidence, he might intrust her with the story of his life. This was to be as he saw fit at the time.

He began to speculate on his probable reception. It had never before struck him as strange that it was now three weeks since that memorable afternoon when she had come to him through the snow-storm, and he had seen nothing more of her.

He had told her then of the Aytouns coming. He fought his memory to bring before him how she had received the news. Nothing unusual had attracted his notice in any way. He could not remember a word she had said.

Still he had not seen her since; and Colonel Aytoun had, for certain, once, and only too probably oftener.

Carry's and Lily's tale of their sister's headache recurred to his mind. Why had they said so to him, when immediately after Colonel Aytoun had left the ice? He remembered that he had barely begun to ask after Miss Tolleton when they had saved him the trouble of going on.

Did they want to keep him away from the house?

Now on one side, now on the other, argued the disturbed brain.

"If I were a young man," said Mr Smith to himself with a faint smile, "I should begin to think I was in love. But I am going to do that which does not look very like a lover. I shall speak calmly and dispassionately. I wish to take advantage of my position as her father's friend to tell her in plain terms the character of the creature who is molesting her. I have no further interest in the matter than her

welfare. She cannot misinterpret that, and the others shall have no chance of making me a laughing-stock."

The idea of being made a laughing-stock was, however, so distasteful, that he could not refrain from putting forth a few suggestions on the other side.

"Of course it would be ridiculous. Of course I should never dream of such a thing; still, I am but fifty, and Colonel Aytoun is fifty-one. Captain Wellwood did not see age to be anything in his favour or disfavour. He certainly held it no safeguard. I would make her happy; I would—— Pooh! this is worse and worse. How am I ever to speak to her to-day, if I fill my head with such sickly rubbish? Tra-la-la-la-lira! A fine day for a walk. I must go early and get to business. Somehow or other the thing must be managed. Tra-la-la-la-la."

Cheerfully trolling a Tyrolean scrap, he set to work on his breakfast, resolved to find his way to Freelands in the course of the morning, and take what chances Fortune offered for the interview.

Daylight made the whole affair simpler.

Oh for another walk to the view!

Then at that moment the brilliant, the delightful resolve flashed through his mind—another walk to the view he would have.

The summer-house was complete. It had been finished two days before, but the other events of the week had combined to chase it from his memory.

Now the recollection came with exquisite surprise.

Miss Tolleton had promised to inspect the house when finished. He would claim her promise. He would ask her out before them all; and be quite frank, and open, and old-mannish about it. They would not have anything to laugh at.

She must come by herself—it was her summer-house; and he would walk off with her before all the windows of the house, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Such a day for the expedition! All the snow had melted before the frost came. The sun shone upon sparkling meadows, dripping glittering icicles, cracking furrows.

Helen Tolleton stood at the open glass-door of the drawing-room, looking out on the tempting scene with a dissatisfied air.

"I am so sick of that plantation," she said. "When these Aytouns are gone, I think I shall never enter it again. Three weeks! And I have hardly been anywhere else! It is too bad. Sometimes I could throw up the whole affair, if it were not that, having gone so far, it would be a pity to undo all when it may be near the end."

"I suppose we shall meet him," said Carry, to whom this was addressed. "Lily and I are going to the village, and he is generally somewhere on the road."

"How do you know that? You have never met him."

"He told us yesterday, before he came up here, that he had been looking out for us every day, and wondered we never went to the village."

"You did not tell me that. How glad I am we took the precaution! Well, I shall persevere a little longer. But as for you two, it really does not signify; he can get nothing out of you. Let Lily answer him; she can, if she takes care."

"So could I," grumbled Carry, offended as she always was at this suggestion. "You and Lily always fancy I make mistakes, whereas the truth is, I never made one yet. But as for Colonel Aytoun, I am sure I have no wish to speak to him."

"If one only knew where he was!" said Helen, despondingly. "If I could but know he was safe anywhere else, I should like so much to go too."

"Don't get down-hearted, Nelly," said her other sister, coming in. "We'll find out all we can; and it cannot possibly go on much longer."

This consolation was meagre—it was insufficient. Helen knew Colonel Aytoun better, and knew that it could go on a very great deal longer.

She was sick of it, of him, of staying in the house, and neither seeing nor hearing anything new, pleasant, and exciting.

She said this to herself, and said it from the bottom of her heart, as the truth of truths it was. But the thought was hardly framed ere she called a halt. What was that? Some one coming through the plantation. Not Colonel Aytoun! Horrible, but quickly-dispelled fear.

No, it was a wideawake, a grey wideawake, a grey figure —Mr Smith.

Mr Smith coming through the much-abused plantation! He had never done such a thing before. And if she had gone with her sisters, she might just have missed him, and he would have come for nothing. Did she not know whose presence brought him to Freelands? Of course she did. The having been kept at home, which had just before been bewailed as a misery, appeared now the greatest piece of good fortune.

It was all astonishment and delight. It was an adventure; it might be a climax.

Quick as thought she had stept out, and stretched her hand to meet him.

"Such a day! A day for summer, for June, for any time, is it not?" cried she, hardly knowing what she said. "Every one is out except me, I'm afraid. But you have met my sisters?"

He had seen them, but thought they had not seen him. In truth, he had taken pains not to be seen. On approaching the house, he had heard voices, and caught sight of the two girls closing the gate.

One he imagined for a moment to be Helen, but she turned her head, and it was Lily. He had quietly waited till the two figures disappeared in the avenue, and then, turning the corner, had immediately come in sight of herself. Fortune *had* favoured him.

Her father out, too; she alone—the house empty; his reception all that was warm and flattering. Captain Wellwood's insinuations were thrown to the four winds of heaven.

Who could wonder if, sitting in that sunny room, listening to the pleasant words, and looking at the bright smiles, he felt again something of the enchantment of his dream? Sweet sorceress, who could wonder?

It was as easy now to prefer his request, as it would have been difficult at any other time.

She granted the petition before it was half uttered; answered the look; and rose with such an eagerness of assent that had he not read these signs aright, it might have filled him with presumption. He told himself so. But he was wise and understanding, and there was no danger.

She softly opened the door, slid across the hall, and

returned fully equipped before many minutes had elapsed. No one else stirred in the house. When she came noiselessly back, she was impatient to be off.

They set off through the plantation. Once out of sight of the house, Helen talked fast and excitedly, and her step was more rapid than she had any idea of.

If Colonel Aytoun were anywhere about! If he should see them! If he should meet them!

Well, let him. This was her chance, and make the most of it she would.

She had been shut up, imprisoned, bored to death, for the last three weeks; and now that she had broken her tether, it seemed in the very breaking harder than before.

She would have a day of it. She was with the man she liked, and she had got away from the man she disliked, and there was a sense of danger, and defiance, and triumph about the whole proceeding, which made the walking off with plain Mr Smith quite a feat.

Certainly a meeting with her enemy would be critical. But she meant not to meet him. She meant that while he pictured her dragging out her time in the routine of a stuffy sick-room, or, disbelieving that tale, condemned to be shut up in the house dull and moping, she should be taking her fill of the glorious sunshine, and the pleasant companionship which had so unexpectedly come to her. She laughed at her tormentor.

As soon as they left the short cut they were out of the way even of this chance danger. There was not the slightest fear of a meeting in Mr Smith's private grounds.

The long path among the woods was admirably adapted for a lover's walk. Two could walk abreast, while more could not. Two could say what they liked to each other, and only the larches and the oaks whisper the secret. And though, perhaps, when the heights were climbed, and the little plateau gained, there might have been room for more than two in the pretty summer-house now resting there, yet surely if there did happen to be only that number in it, no two people could have been more happily placed.

It seemed made for a tryst—for the site of a confidential conversation.

It was not, however, until the summer-house itself had

been inspected all over, and admired from within and without, that the owner, turning to his fair companion, took her hand and led her to the seat, confessing that it was for a confidential conversation he had brought her there.

Helen's heart gave a great stound, and the colour which rushed to her face could not escape his notice.

They had been laughing and chatting gaily all the way; and so gaily, so easily, that even as she grew more confident of her power over him, and more certain of his recognition of it, she had lost her anticipation of any definite results of the day.

Such an idea had crossed her mind at the first; but in the absence of anything to feed it, it had gradually been dispelled.

She must bide her time. She was more and more sure of him, and more and more satisfied with him; and so well pleased was she with his words and his looks, and his whole bearing towards herself during the walk, that a few more such meetings would, she was assured, leave her nothing further to desire.

The summer-house, he owned it now, and with a most significant hesitation, was expressly hers. He should never have thought of it but for her suggestion. It was no longer a pleasure she had given him—it was now treated as one he had designed for her.

And then, just as she had taken in the full meaning of the compliment, and had made a most spirited and suitable rejoinder, all in a moment he had drawn her inside, and confessed his purpose.

A confidential conversation! Who has nerves not of catgut—who has a heart which is not a mere pumping-machine—who has curiosity not stone-blind, and can be in for a confidential conversation without a qualm? And then, between a man and a woman! A man, too, who might be a lover, and a woman who wished him to be come so!

Helen might be pardoned if at that moment she thought it was all coming, and felt herself taken at unawares.

The warm blood she could not curb, leapt, as we said, to her cheeks; and Mr Smith saw it, and I am afraid he rather liked it.

He sat down at a little distance. He felt an awkwardness about beginning. He turned his eyes away. The blush had made him feel young, and youth should be cautious.

"I may say what will explain my boldness," said he.

Then Miss Tolleton felt sure he meant to say something to the purpose. She was calming down. Her assent was almost steady. "Oh yes."

"But if I do, I must have a promise first."

"What promise?"

"That you will not be angry with me. No, I will not say that, but rather that if you are angry with me—if you think me interfering and impertinent, and feel disposed to bid me mind my own business—you will think of this, that I have but one motive, the regard, the—the—may I say it?—the affection I have for you and yours; indeed, it is a very deep and true one."

He had not meant to say so much. He was shocked at the sound of his own words. He was losing his head altogether, had not her cheerfully unmoved rejoinder acted as a restorative.

It was not quite what she had expected, and she was able to speak indifferently; but had it not been for the last clause of the sentence, her tone had not been so cheerful. "I am quite sure that anything you say will be prompted by kindness and friendship; and as to your being impertinent, no one else would ever think of such a thing."

"Would not you?"

"Do you think I should?"

Smiling at him, testing him. Could he help being inclined to draw a little nearer, yet constrained to keep away?

No, he was sure she would not, and he should speak freely.

"It is," he said, "about Colonel Aytoun."

"Colonel Aytoun!"

"You may well be surprised. Colonel Aytoun's affairs are not much to either of us apparently. We have only once spoken of him before, and on that occasion both of us, I think, owned to merely a slight acquaintanceship with him. Your words, dear Miss Tolleton, I remember perfectly. 'A very slight acquaintanceship.' Was it not so?"

"Yes," said she, faintly.

"And I, I think, did not claim much more. Yet I have known him, and intimately, for twenty years."

She uttered an involuntary exclamation.

"Yes, it is just twenty years since we first met." He paused to consider whether he should now enter on the circumstances.

"And you have been friends ever since?"

"Friends? No." He resolved he would tell her. "It will be best for me to speak plainly. You will not wonder that it should be painful, but perhaps you may wonder when I say you are the first person to whom I have ever told the story of our meeting. Many know it, but not from me. To you I will myself explain it briefly, for you will not misunderstand me. I would not expose Colonel Aytoun without a reason. I have a reason now."

Her cheek was not flushed at this—it was paling fast. She thought she knew the reason.

"You know Mrs Aytoun?" said he.

"Yes; no—I have really never seen her."

"Indeed! But, of course, you told me so. She was ill when you were there. My story relates to her. She was to have been my wife."

"Your wife!"

"Yes, indeed; my dear and honoured wife. Her hand was promised me; her heart I thought already mine. Our wedding-day was close at hand, everything prepared, and but for the death of a relation she would have been my bride before ever she had seen Colonel Aytoun. But the day was put off for a month, and in that month all was changed. He knew all about it. I will not say, perhaps I ought not to say, that the knowledge acted as a stimulant, but it certainly was no check. He pursued her, openly and in secret—took what he could get before others, and the rest by stealth. The thing was done; and it was only when done that there were plenty to tell me this had been his aim from the beginning. He had been freely boasting of his intentions among his brother officers."

"And they helping him?"

"No; I believe they never dreamt of his succeeding. He had been a laughing-stock among them, and they were in hopes of seeing him baffled. In fact, they laid bets on

either side, and made a joke of the affair; but they were ashamed of it afterwards. Some of them I can name among my best friends. They meant no harm—they had not calculated on his achieving such a triumph. He had worked for it with his whole soul."

"I believe it!" said Helen, passionately. "I believe every word of it! It is just like him! Just what he would do!"

"And this is Emmeline's husband! Poor, poor, Emmeline! The most to be pitied of women. The sweetest, the saddest, the loveliest——"

"Is she?"

What a world of meaning in that soft exclamation!

He stopped, confused and conscious. Her heart sank.

"I have always heard so of Mrs Aytoun, and now I am sure of it. How I wish we could have known her! But I am interrupting you?"

"No, no; you recall me to myself. I was thinking of her as she was then, and when you see her now you will say I am dreaming. She is altogether altered."

"Oh no, I am sure we shall not find her altered," with returning animation. "I have no doubt we shall think her all you describe. But what am I talking about? We have no likelihood of seeing her at all. We do not know her, and we do not like her husband."

"Do you not like him? Dear Miss Tolleton, that is the very thing I wished to be certain of. He is not a man to be liked; he is not a man to be trusted; he is not even to be known by a young woman, if she can avoid it."

"Indeed I believe it; I have heard so before, and I know it is true. Oh, Mr Smith, I too have something to say about him. I do know him better than I chose to allow, but I do not wish to know him—none of us do. We are resolved to drop his acquaintance if we possibly can. Are we not right?"

"Indeed you are, if I may say so. It is the best thing you can do."

"But you see he does not like it."

"Who would?"

Both were smiling now, both were relieved, both happy.

"I do not wonder at him in the least," said he.

"I do wonder, however," rejoined Helen, her indignation

again kindled, "that after he has been shown as plainly as we have shown him that we wish to give him up, he should persist in forcing himself upon us."

"You can refuse to see him."

"We can—we do. But he annoys us continually; he will not take a refusal. It is absolute persecution."

He looked thoughtful.

"Your father should tell him plainly."

Helen looked, but could not well say, that he did not care a rush for her father.

"You know what he is."

"Yes; but still I cannot quite understand it. I suppose —you know I am to be impertinent—that he is rather a friend of yours than of the family in general?"

"What makes you think so?"

"My knowledge of Colonel Aytoun"

"It is true, but I am no friend of his. And he can be no true friend of mine to go on as he does."

"My dear young lady, he is no true friend of anybody, and certainly can be no right one for you. I used a wrong expression; what I meant was, that you were his attraction?"

"Yes," said Helen; "I believe I was."

"And are still?"

"Yes."

"You are not displeased with my freedom?"

"No; you never displease me."

"Then let me say this. Colonel Aytoun has had many women whom he has admired, but being also the most fickle and capricious of human beings, as soon as the novelty has worn off, he has never been known to attach himself permanently to one. This is what I cannot understand in the present instance. To be candid and uncomplimentary, whatever he thought of you at first, he ought to be quite tired of you by this time."

Helen laughed. "I wish he were."

"So do I. You would soon cease to regret him. But you say he is not?"

"No." She laughed again, but a great idea was in her mind. It showed what Helen might have been; not alas! what she was.

"I *will* tell him; I will tell him all. He is so good, so

kind, and so—yes, I am sure he is so very much in love, that now is my time. Then, Colonel Aytoun, I defy you."

And so, with hardly a thought of what she was going to do, she rushed into the subject.

"You have told me a great deal that must have been very hard for you to tell; it would be a poor return if I were to conceal anything about this matter. The truth is then, Mr Smith, I cannot be quite as decided as I should wish in forbidding Colonel Aytoun the house."

He looked attentive.

"Do you remember my telling you I had been a giddy girl?"

"Yes."

"And you would not believe me; but you must now."

"Surely if I must, it is no such great crime in one so young and so——well?"

"You must believe it, because it has given Colonel Aytoun a hold over me."

"Then the hold is gone."

"Gone? Yes, in a way. But even when the hold is gone, there are broken ends remaining. Don't you see?"

"I see," he said, gravely.

"I will tell you the truth, and the whole truth, Mr Smith; all I ask you to believe is, that it is the whole. Bad as my behaviour was with Colonel Aytoun, there is nothing lying behind what I confess."

He breathed more freely.

"I was only seventeen when we stayed at the Abbey," continued Miss Tolleton; "and I thought Colonel Aytoun then all that was delightful. He took pains to be so—he did indeed. Mrs Aytoun was ill, as I said, and there was nobody to interfere. My father never sees these things. I know that people made remarks—it was natural they should. In plain terms, we flirted together horribly. For myself, I can only say I never look back on that time without shame. Oh, you don't know how I hate myself whenever I think of it!"

She had done it now, for better for worse. The truth was out.

To say he was not startled, not shocked, would be untrue.

Only seventeen! Was that a palliation or aggravation of the offence?

Flirted horribly with a married man! People made remarks!

Her words seemed to have burnt themselves into his brain.

He had called her a model of discretion. Had any one else asserted what he now heard from her own lips, he would have scorned the calumny. Had the same thing been said of any other girl among his acquaintance, he would mentally have contrasted her with the prudent, gracious, all-charming one beside him. He could hardly credit it. He felt a stagger in his faith. His idol shook.

It was another blow of the kind Philip had struck him the night before. That, he had rallied from. It had passed, and left scarcely a mark; but this was a deeper one. He felt it through and through.

All this Helen marked. True, her eyes were on the ground, and her head averted; but her woman's instinct told her as certainly as if he had spoken the words, that he was unprepared for this.

She felt him pause; she felt his bewilderment, his stunned surprise. She wished she had let well alone.

If she had only stopped short of the whole! All had been well, up to a certain point, and then it had miscarried. If she had owned to knowing Colonel Aytoun intimately, and then, on discovering more of his character, wishing to shake him off, it would have been sufficient. So far he had understood, and approved.

Now, by one false step she had ruined all. Why could she not have held her tongue? What prompted her to be so unnecessarily candid? She resolved that whatever came of it, nothing should ever induce her to speak upon impulse again.

Yet she had thought she could trust him. She had fancied—strange, foolish fancy!—that he was more noble than he proved to be.

If she had fallen in his eyes, so had he in hers.

All this passed in the two or three minutes' silence which followed her confession. Each was occupied with thoughts of the other.

"We had better come now, perhaps," said Miss Tolleton, at last. Her voice was hard and cold, and she rose as she spoke. "You have heard all I had to tell, and will un-

derstand it would not be pleasant for me to have it repeated."

He had risen involuntarily, as she did, and their eyes met.

There was a forlorn look in hers which belied the measured words, and in an instant all was changed.

"I cannot go yet."

"Why not, Mr Smith? We have nothing further to say to each other, I imagine. The subject has occupied us long enough, and for the future we will, if you please, drop it. I shall be wanted at home now."

"You may have nothing more to say to me, but I, Miss Tolleton, ought to have something to say to you. Pray, pray do not turn away. Hear me, though I do not deserve it. I cannot express my feelings on hearing you so nobly, so generously, avow an indiscretion which your present true, gentle, maidenly modesty only contradicts too flatly. If for a moment that very contradiction, being so extreme, made the revelation startling, it was but for a moment. Can you forgive that moment? I ought not to have hesitated, but I hesitate no longer; my regard and esteem for you are higher than ever."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Dear lady," he said, taking her hand, "you told me this, taking me for a friend. Will you not forgive your friend?"

"I did not think——" she murmured.

"No, how could you? You did not dream of so harsh, so unjust a judge. A counsellor you wished, and found a father confessor, ready with penances and paternosters. That's right; let me see you smile again. Now I know we are friends."

"If you will be friends with me."

"Hush! Not a word of that sort; you must not be hard upon me. Friends with you indeed!" She almost thought he would have kissed her hand, but he only held it, pressed it, and let it go.

"That is settled then. And now one word more. I know this Aytoun well. He is a bully and a coward. You have in reality nothing to fear from him. Let him say what he will, he is nowhere believed. Of *you* he may say what he likes. Nothing will so effectually give the

lie to any slur he would cast on Miss Tolleton as a knowledge of herself."

"Shall we come now?" said Helen.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE END OF THE WALK.

On the way home conversation slid into easier topics.

Mr Smith's manner was grave, but Helen felt that it lacked none of its former interest. She too was thoughtful. What had passed within the last hour had touched her in more ways than one, and she felt in no mood for gaiety.

If he had asked her at that time to be his wife, she would have vowed with all her heart that that heart should be his, his truly, and his only, till death did them part.

But he did not ask her.

Towards the entrance of the wood path, and just behind a bend in the hill which concealed it from passers-by, a shallow stream trickled across the way. In summer time it was dry, and even when full was easily crossed by means of stepping-stones. During the frost it had been frozen over, and was scarcely distinguishable from the path.

Mr Smith and his companion had crossed on their way up without noticing that they had done so; but ere they returned the sun had so far softened the ice as to leave some of the stones, which had been taken out of their places by the former floods, loose.

On one of these Helen placed her foot. It overturned, and she fell her full length on the path.

With an expression of concern, Mr Smith attempted to raise her, but to his surprise and her own the attempt was followed by such pain as to make her cry out, and the colour leave her face.

"Wait a minute, please," she gasped; "this will go off." But attempting to say more, her voice failed, and her eyes closed with a look of suffering.

He bade her lean on him, and tried again to raise her in

his arms, but in vain. After the fall, she had, with the first involuntary exertion, drawn herself up into a sitting posture, but this she was unable to change.

It was evident that the hurt was severe, and she confessed to a fear of having sprained her ankle.

"It gives me such a twinge," she said, "if I make the slightest effort to move it, that I am afraid it must be a sprain; but perhaps it may go off—in a few minutes—I hope; wait a minute——"

"There is no hurry—do not think of moving," said he, soothingly. "By-and-by we can try again. Perhaps you would take my stick—or my arm," hesitatingly. "But do not move yet. Unless, indeed, the ground is so wet—do you think you can?" for she was making another effort.

He put his hand under her elbow, he put his arm round her waist, and she struggled to the bank; but there the eyes closed again, and a convulsive twitching of the lips made him kneel beside her, terrified.

"Dear Miss Tolleton, what shall we do? You must have help. You must have a surgeon, and——"

"Oh no, no surgeon; it is really not worth while!" she cried, suppressing with difficulty exclamations of pain. "I only feel a little sick and faint. Ah!" with relief, as her hat was gently taken off, and a wet handkerchief applied to the forehead—"I shall be better now."

Her head sank down upon his shoulder. She did not half know what she was saying, but she was perfectly conscious whom she was saying it to. Sick though she was, and faint, and bearing her pain as bravely as she could, she was racking her brains all the while to consider how best to extricate herself from what might prove an unpleasant dilemma.

If possible she must walk home. The stick would be a help, but his arm she hardly could accept. How if she had to do it, however? How if she could not walk at all?

Even so it proved. She could not walk by any possibility, with any assistance. Every fresh attempt brought on a fresh spasm, and at last the joint began to ache and throb even in repose. It was clear that there was no prospect of her being able to move, far less to walk any distance.

Matters began to look grave. Each grew conscious that the accident was more serious than it had seemed at first.

Helen, uncomfortable in mind, and suffering in body, could think of nothing. He had to decide for her.

"There are only two things to be done. If I remain here with you, and trust to the chance of attracting the attention of passers-by in the short cut, we might be here all day. I am certain you ought to have assistance at once. Yet how to leave you!"

"Leave me!" said she, faintly.

"Must I not? You must decide. But indeed, indeed, I fear it is the only thing to be done. I know this ought to be attended to at once, and if I wait——"

"Oh, not *here!*"

He understood. "No, at your own home. You are growing worse every moment. Can I go?"

"Yes, yes," cried she, herself again; "I see what you mean. I trust you. But oh, Mr Smith, you will not—you will go straight to my sisters——" She could not express what she meant, which was, "You will not let any one else hear of it?"

"Where shall you get help?" she asked.

"I am going now to my own house; it is nearer than yours, and there is nobody to be alarmed there. Besides, I have a small pony carriage which is not too broad for the short cut, and if you are not able by that time to crawl so far, I can carry you."

"Oh, I shall be able to walk. Thank you, thank you; it is a good plan, and we have no carriage to come if you did go home. Perhaps it will be able to go by the plantation."

"Certainly. The path there is no narrower than this."

"That will do then," said Helen, wearily. "I am giving you so much trouble, but you are too good—no one need——" Her broken sentence, her embarrassment, told him what was in her mind.

"No one need ever know anything about it," said he, in a low voice.

And then he was gone.

He was gone, hurrying along, out of sight the next moment, a tumult of thoughts whirling through his brain.

No one need know. What?

No one must know, no one should know the extremity of his folly and delusion. But what was it that she

desired to have concealed? Had she guessed it? Oh, mortification and shame if she had! That he should dare to love the fairest, loveliest woman in the land! That he should raise his arrogant eyes even to look at her! What wonder if she had scorned and laughed at such insanity? All honour to her that she had only yearned to hide it. Noble, beautiful Helen! She had saved him this; what would he not do for her in return?

No one need know. He blessed her for the thought.

It seemed hours to the poor watcher's listening ears, before the light rumble of wheels on the path below told that her deliverance was at hand.

They stopped, and a minute after she had managed to rise, and was feebly trying to drag herself down towards the bank, when Mr Smith appeared, springing up the ascent, with a hasty step.

"My dear, you must not walk alone;"—he was going to be altogether paternal and easy in his treatment, he had resolved. "No, no; I don't care what you say. Put your hand on my shoulder. So! Let me put my hand beneath your elbow, and we shall be there directly. You are feeling stronger? That's right. The rest has done you good."

The pony-carriage came in sight. She half shrank back.

"I did not bring any servants," he went on. "Brownie will stand quite quietly. Servants are always in the way when there is exertion to be made, and I was sure they would only fuss you. In fact, I told them nothing about it. When it gets abroad that Miss Tolleton has sprained her ankle, mind it shan't be laid at my door. Neither of us must say a word about this fine road we were so proud of. Leave it to other folks to imagine for themselves where it took place."

By this time they had reached the carriage, and, with a sense of unutterable relief, she found herself seated in it.

Mr Smith was about to get in likewise, when, with sudden recollection, he put his hand in his pocket. "You are going to have a glass of port."

"Oh no, thank you." She was sure she could not drink it; could not swallow it if she tried. A lump rose in her throat. His forethought, his consideration for her, was almost too much.

He quietly poured it out, and to please him she tried. Yes, she must. He would not let her off till she did, and the wine was drunk.

"You are too good to me," she said, gratefully. "Yes, thank you, I really do feel better. Perhaps I shall not need the doctor."

It was evident she did not want the doctor, but by no means so plain that she did not need him.

Long before they reached home her spirits had faded again, and her courage failed; and when he had seen her safely delivered into the care of her sisters, he had received their willing permission to go himself for Dr Hunt.

The doctor was at dinner, and came out to Mr Smith smelling of beefsteak and onions.

He pulled rather a wry face on receiving the message, and looked at the clock. The beefsteak had hardly been on the table five minutes, and he had just filled his own plate.

If Mr Smith would have come in and partaken thereof, and been civil to the doctor's wife, and seated himself beside Maria, the interruption would have been palatable.

But at that moment Mr Smith could neither endure the thought of Maria nor of the beefsteak.

He was full of one subject, he was not hungry, and he longed to be alone. The little, hot, noisy dining-parlour, with its rattle of knives and glasses, its inquisitive tongues and eyes, would be intolerable.

He delivered the message, and escaped. Miss Tolleton had been walking out, her foot had slipped, and she had sprained her ankle. He had offered to come for Dr Hunt, as he should be in the village sooner than any one they could send on foot. He pointed to the pony-carriage, excused himself, and drove off in it.

The doctor puckered up his mouth, and returned to the beefsteak.

"I do wish my dinner-hour were not always to be invaded," said he. "Jane, tell William to have the horse round in a quarter of an hour."

His wife inquired who had sent for him.

"Miss Helen Tolleton has sprained her ankle."

"Poor dear girl!" cried she. (Helen had been quite the poor dear girl ever since the entertainment at the Hill).

"Poor thing! How came she to fall? Dear, dear! I must go and see her. I suppose it was at the meadows?"

The doctor supposed so too, grunted assent, and took some more mustard.

"I know I shall have an indigestion now," said he. "Beefsteak is what I never can eat unless I have a good hour's quiet after it; and this is not as tender as it might be."

"Indeed it is, though, if you know where to cut it!" cried his wife, touchy on her housekeeping. "I asked Bullett himself how long it had been killed when I saw it hanging up, and he said it was Monday's. Cut this side, that bit hanging loose. What you gave me was as tender as a chicken."

But the doctor would not change his slice, nor alter his grumble.

"To have to start in a quarter of an hour after this!"

"Would half an hour not be time enough?"

"And have Mr Smith down upon me?"

"Mr Smith!"

"Ay, Mr Smith. It was he who brought the message; and I must say, for a disinterested person, he seemed curiously urgent about it."

"Jane, you can put the potatoes down, and come when we ring."

Jane left the room amidst an ominous silence; but if she stamped round the table heavily enough when in it, she must have had a lighter step outside. She was never heard going along the passage.

No one observed this, however. Mrs Hunt's voice rose in clear calm tones. "I do not understand what Mr Smith had to do with it?"

"Nor I, either."

"What did he say, Robert?"

"That Miss Tolleton had slipped and sprained her ankle."

"That's not what I mean, my dear, as you know very well."

"Perfectly. You need not be cross about it; I know no more myself."

"The thing is, how came he to know about it? Why did he bring the message? Could they not have sent a servant? That great bloated Corker——"

"Would have taken considerably longer time on the way. Mr Smith was driving himself; I suppose that was it."

Mrs Hunt's brow cleared.

"Very true; it was to save time. But now, how did he come to know of it?"

"He happened to be passing by; at least I suppose he was."

"Then you knew all the time!" in an injured voice. "It's as clear as day, doctor. She had a bad fall; the poor thing couldn't walk home, I daresay—and he offers to let you know. It was a piece of common humanity; quite what I should have expected from Mr Smith. There is no mystery in the matter."

"Who said there was?"

"Well, really, my dear, you looked so put out, I thought, I'm sure I can't tell what."

"Poor Helen!" said Maria. "How she will dislike being kept indoors in weather like this, and losing all her skating. She was not there yesterday, so I suppose she had gone early this morning to make up for it. How long will it be before she can skate again, papa—a week?"

"A week? There will be no more skating for her this winter, I can tell you. She may think herself lucky if she is out of the house at all before winter is over."

"Papa!"

"Ay, papa! But she may. It's all these miserable high-heeled boots that you will deform your feet with. The only wonder is that any of you escape."

"You won't allow us to wear them, papa."

"Not while I can help it; but some day when you have nobody but your husbands to look after you, you'll be just like the rest of them."

Mrs Hunt did not revive her suggestion about going to see Helen, and the doctor went alone.

He was not quite so easy as she had been about Mr Smith. She had only heard the message, and had not heard it delivered.

Mr Smith's version of the accident had been clarified and condensed by passing through his hands. It had been a confused jumble when first given; and no particulars had been stated. When well filtered the story made quite a

creditable appearance, as may have been seen from its effects on Mrs Hunt; but Mr Smith had not himself put it through the process, nor could he without changing the face of the affair more than truth allowed. And of this Dr Hunt had a glimmering suspicion.

One thing, moreover, was impressed upon his mind more than all the rest, and that was that Mr Smith had insisted on his speedy attendance far more strongly than he had considered at all necessary. Cases of this sort were not so urgent as all that. He would have gone within the hour comfortably.

But he had found it impossible to say this; and beyond the disagreeableness of having to start with the beefsteak still in an undigested condition, was the unwelcome reflection that he was doing so by Mr Smith's special request.

By the time he had seen the sprain, however, he was partially mollified. Mr Smith might be excused. Miss Tolleton was in great pain, and her sisters were anxiously looking out for him. He had not exaggerated, although he had really meant to do so, when he had affirmed she might think herself fortunate if she were out before winter was gone. It was far worse than he had anticipated.

He was sorry for her now—as sorry for her suffering, as he had shortly before been angry with it. The invasion of his dinner-hour was a theme to rouse his indignation, but it was an abstract ire, seldom extended to the perpetrator of the offence. In this he imitated his wife. He had learnt from her how to scold after a wholesale fashion.

As soon as the bandages had been applied, and directions given, curiosity must be satisfied.

"How did all this happen?" he asked Carry.

Carry professed her ignorance. She and her other sister had gone to the village. Helen had been walking alone, and said she had slipped her foot.

"On the ice I suppose?"

"I don't think it was on the ice, was it, Lily?" Carry began to find her boasted powers of answering failing her.

"Oh no," replied Lily, coming forward at once; "it was not on the ice at all. She was walking, not skating; just walking along the road, and her foot slipped on a loose stone."

"Whereabouts?"

"Really I don't know."

She did not. The quick-witted Helen had foreseen all this, and guarded against it. "Dr Hunt will try to draw the story out of you, as soon as Mr Smith has been to him, so you had better know nothing. Besides, I can't tell you about it just now; you shall hear the whole afterwards."

They had forborne to press her, and when it came to pass as she had prophesied, they felt her wisdom.

"Not that I could not have answered him," said Lily; "but after all it was the simplest way."

She therefore said "I don't know," truly.

Meantime Helen lay with closed eyes, exhausted, and still suffering, but capable all the time of telling her tale had she been disposed, with perfect distinctness.

Dr Hunt would fain have forced it out of her. He looked doubtfully towards the sofa, but the closed eyes check-mated him. He was obliged to let her alone.

"It really is not safe," said he, in a solemn whisper, "walking about alone on these slippery roads. If Mr Smith had not happened to be passing by, your sister might have been there for hours."

"So she might," said Carry.

The doctor's eyes gleamed intelligence. He thought he had learnt one fact.

"How did she manage to get into the carriage?"

"I don't know, really. She could not walk a single step when she came here, but she said it was not so bad at first. Nelly!"

"Oh, don't disturb her!" said Lily, hastily. And the doctor was reluctantly compelled to echo the exclamation. He had made her comparatively easy, and thought she might by this time have opened her eyes.

But Helen knew better.

However, he had, even as it was, gained considerable comfort. That disagreeable vision of Mr Smith's face giving the message was partially dispelled. He had been startled, and was not accustomed to assisting ladies. He had done his best, driven her home, and come off for assistance. No man could, in common humanity, as his wife had said, have done otherwise.

And as to his being so hurried and fluttered in his speech, it was quite natural that he should be that. Unmarried

men were often put out of their way, when they were suddenly called upon in an emergency: they were unaccustomed to it; they were taken by surprise. Living alone was apt to make people nervous.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HELEN HAS MADE A FOOL OF YOU, TOO.

HELEN had now a sad time of it before her. At first indeed she began rapidly to amend; but weeks passed, and her progress did not keep pace with them.

Her sisters wondered at her patience. Her father shook his head, and suggested that Dr Hunt should prescribe a tonic.

But Dr Hunt, who saw the very word taken, as it were, out of his mouth, sneered at the idea. Miss Tolleton needed a tonic less than any patient he had; all she wanted in that way was change of air, and, emphatically, society.

And then he went home and told his wife that any one who lived in the house with old Tolleton might well be sick for lack of other society.

Mrs Hunt suggested that his daughters, at any rate, had lived with him long enough without that result.

"They have not been condemned to be in the same room all day long."

"Neither are they now, I suppose."

"The others aren't—she is. He is always there when I call, at least."

Mrs Hunt was a matter-of-fact person. "Depend upon it, it is not that, doctor."

"Well, of course it's not that, if you come to pick it to pieces. The girl wants air and exercise, and she can't have it. Besides, her nights have been bad, and she has gone through a good deal. Many a one would have been worse, but they have all good constitutions to fall back upon."

"I don't know that it is that either," said she, mysteriously.

"That what's what?"

"I am not sure that it is altogether her illness that makes Helen so quiet."

"So I said this minute, and you pooh-poohed the idea. What are you thinking of now? What have you got into your head that makes you wag it in that knowing way? It's something sharp and spicy, or I'm mistaken."

"Indeed, if you think so, we had better say no more about it."

"Heighty-tighty! You will punish yourself more than me, old lady. But come now, let us hear it."

"Oh no, it's a pity you should——"

"Don't be a goose, Polly. You and I ought to know each other by this time, and not start at a word. There now, that's a good lass, put pride in your pocket, and out with the worst."

"Well," said she, mollified, "it's only my own idea, so mind it goes no further, but I have an idea, I'll not deny. You know that Colonel Aytoun who was at the Castle?"

"No. How should I?"

"You know him by sight, that's what I mean."

"By sight? Yes, well enough. But he has nothing to do with the Tolletons."

"I'm not so sure of that."

He began to lose patience. "For heaven's sake don't make yourself ridiculous, my dear! Say what you *are* sure of and be done with it. Has Colonel Aytoun been flirting with Helen? Is that what you mean? All I can say is, that if he has, he would need to keep it dark at Sauffrenden, for my lady there wouldn't like the notion."

"There are two ladies there who wouldn't like it."

"Oh, ah, yes, his wife; but no one thinks of her, poor soul!"

"But about Helen. I'll tell you how I came to find out anything. This afternoon I was sitting in the chair by the fire, and the room was rather dark; that drawing-room always is when the sun is off it, and we had been having a good long chat. Poor thing! I had been thinking of all I could say to amuse her. Well, as I say, the room was dark, and I suppose I was quite in the shade, for I could see Helen's face well enough, and it was that which told the secret. All of a sudden the door burst open, and Lily

came flying in. She never saw me, or I daresay she would have thought twice before she spoke, but she called out, 'Oh Helen, Colonel Aytoun's gone!' at the top of her voice. I tell you, Robert, Helen's face was the colour of that curtain! They both looked at me, and Lily could have bitten her tongue out, I could see. Helen answered well enough; she always can, you know. But she couldn't take me in. What girls they are, to be sure! How in the world could they have got hold of that man, and he at the Castle, where they can't get a footing at any price? 'Colonel Aytoun's gone!' That was what she said. 'Oh Helen, Colonel Aytoun's gone!' And then Helen got as red as a turkey-cock; and if I never saw that other one taken aback in my life before, I did for once."

"What did you do?"

"Just sat as still as a mouse. I wanted to see all I could see, and of course it was no business of mine. I never said a word."

"What did Helen say?"

"Something about being glad they had a fine day for their journey. But such a look as she gave Lily!"

"Well, what then?"

"Then I asked if they knew the Colonel well? 'Oh no,' says she; 'we only know them a little.' It was 'them,' you see, this time, though it was only 'him' that Lily thought about. 'It's quite news to you their going?' says I. She began to suspect me then, I fancy. 'Only news because they have been here such an unconscionable time that nobody thought they would ever go. It had grown to be quite a joke among us.' This was her fine tale. Joke indeed! It was no joke that sent the blood to her white face like that, I could tell her. So then she went on, and she and Lily began to laugh, as if they were beginning to remember they ought to be amused. 'So you really have picked up something wonderful at last?' says she. 'Well, Mrs Hunt and I were just agreeing we never knew this place so dull.' And so she went on, but I was up to her; she can't put me off. I wonder what it meant?"

"If that is all you have to ground your story upon, Polly, I wouldn't give a brass farthing for it."

"All! Well, I should have thought it was enough for

anybody who could put two and two together. But you are just like the rest of them. Since this ankle business, Helen has made a fool of you too."

Here the doctor looked undeniably a little guilty.

While the girls were going about, treating him saucily in their heyday, and doing their worst to mislead his daughters, he had joined the rest of the world in railing at them.

But Helen in her bed and on her sofa, was different.

She was in pain, she was brave, and she was beautiful. She welcomed him with a smile, and bade him good-bye with a petition that he would come again. He was her only break in the day. He took her books, pictures, and all the news he could collect on his rounds. In truth he really was kind, and agreeable, and her only resource.

He began to like his visits in spite of old Tolleton, who would always come hovering over the invalid, asking foolish anxious questions. Dr Hunt, instead of thinking the better of him for this little trait of honest fatherliness, felt an increase of dislike.

If he could only have prescribed Mr Tolleton's banishment from the sick-room, he was convinced his patient would have improved.

Even as it was, his visits to Freelands were frequent; more frequent perhaps than any one but himself thought at all necessary when there was nothing wrong but a sprained ankle.

Mrs Hunt, in consequence, had more than once found herself set right on points regarding the family in a way that did not suit her at all; and though her husband had in the present instance no thought of standing up for the absent accused, she took this to be the reason of his throwing discredit on her story.

"My dear," said he at last, very meekly, "you ought not to say things like that. What would the girls think if they heard you?"

"Why are you always taking their part, then?"

"I never thought of taking their part. I believe they are quite equal to amusing themselves with Colonel Aytoun, if he chose to amuse himself with them. But I don't think your evidence is strong enough to prove that they have—that's all. What is a blush? Helen has one of those skins

that you can see the blood move through, if she only talks fast. I dare swear it was all in your fancy."

"I suppose what Lily said was all in my fancy too?"

"Well, no. But your fancy could change the way of saying it. If it was a joke, as they said, she might very well come in full of it, glad of anything to amuse the poor girl lying there all day long; and you might easily mistake her meaning. You know Lily's excited way. She makes mountains out of mole-hills."

Mrs Hunt pursed up her mouth, and twirled some thread round a button she was sewing on, with the velocity of a humming-top.

"If you choose to take it that way, of course you can; but I believe my own eyes and ears. It is the way of those three, Helen at the head of them, to flirt with old and young; and you may depend on it, Colonel Aytoun was not too old for them, if Mr Smith was not."

"Old? no," said the doctor, hastily. "Colonel Aytoun's not an old man; a year or two older than I. But what do you mean about Mr Smith? He's Maria's man, not Helen's."

"Well, Maria's man, now," said Mrs Hunt, doubtfully; "if it's all right, as I hope it is. But I must say it looks rather queer his going off without a word to one of us."

"Then what did you mean about him and Helen? I thought you had given up that idea."

"She was good-natured, I will say that. And they all behaved wonderfully well about it. Whether they ever tried it on with him or not, makes no difference. It was all the better in them if they did."

"You think they did, then?"

"I'm sure I shouldn't like to say positively. I am never the one to take up a report without good grounds for it; I always wish to be fair and just. Ever since Helen spoke to me about Mr Smith and Maria, I have always said I couldn't say to a positive certainty that she had had designs on him herself."

"Did it ever strike you that he had designs on her?"

"He! Mr Smith! No, indeed. What put that into your head?"

"Nothing at all. He went every day to ask how she was before he left, but of course he was bound to do that.

I wondered if he had ever thought of her—just at the first, you know."

And the doctor hummed a few careless notes, very much out of tune, and scanned his wife's face narrowly.

Her answer was clear and forcible. "If he were thinking of her, how could he be thinking of Maria?"

"Very true. Yes; I suppose he is thinking of Maria?"

"Well, we were both of one mind about that, my dear, till now. But I don't know how it is, his going away looks a little odd; or else we are old-fashioned people, and don't understand the way these things are done nowadays."

"If we are old-fashioned, so is Smith. What could take him off in that way?"

"Did he not give you any sort of hint when he was coming back?"

"Not a word. It was Tuesday week, you know—no, it was Monday, for I was on my way to the meeting, and all he said was, that he was going from home, and might be away some time."

"And you asked him in?"

"I asked him in. I told him you and the girls were at home, and that you would be quite angry if he went away without coming to say good-bye. But he thought I was in joke, and said he could not flatter himself that such would be the case. However, I was to say he really had hoped to call, but business had prevented him."

"But he had meant it?"

"So he said."

"Well, I hope it's all right. At any rate, not a word to Maria. I think she misses him. I daresay she will be glad enough to welcome him back again. She shan't have another new frock till he comes, any way. After all, one can never tell what may be at the bottom of things. He may think she would never look at him after such a short acquaintance, and mean to go on with it all the same, by-and-by. One ought not to lay too much stress on his going off for a month or two, after the roving life he has led. With that house there, he is safe to come back to it again some time or other. He is not like those flibbertigibbets of officers who carry on high-sky up to the very night before they start, and then, whew! off they are, and you hear no more of them! Mr Smith's safe enough, to my mind."

But then she had not seen Mr Smith's face; and Dr Hunt felt that however much the return of their neighbour to his own house might be counted upon, his return to Maria was not so certain.

It took all his fatherliness, looking at her as she entered a moment after, to think that any one would prefer Maria to Helen Tolleton—any mere acquaintance, that is to say—any stranger, any man.

Maria, when she came in, was not indeed a taking object. Her hair was rough; one side of her collar, by no means a clean one, had become loose; and her short dress displayed uncomely feet, badly shod and badly stockinged.

Feet are a point on which fathers, brothers, husbands are invariably susceptible. Dr Hunt remembered a pair he had seen that morning; a pair, not very small, indeed rather long and large, but admirably shaped, and delicately clad in the trimmest stocking and tidiest slipper; and wondered if Mr Smith was one to notice such things.

Maria was a good girl, he was fond of her in his way; but neither he nor his wife were exactly proud of their children.

Mrs Hunt glanced at her daughter, but forbore to remark. Since Maria had had the good fortune to captivate a rich bachelor, and she might hope some day to superintend her toilets, and see that she put on her fine clothes properly, she frequently let her present appearance pass without disparagement. Maria, she held, might be no beauty, but no one could say she was ill-looking; and if all her accoutrements were correct, she would pass muster very well.

Maria sat down, and listlessly took up a book.

"What have you been about all afternoon?" inquired her mother.

"Nothing, mamma; there's nothing to be done."

"Nothing to be done! Well, *I* find plenty to do, at all events. I did not think any one in this house need complain of having nothing to do."

"I didn't complain, mamma."

Maria turned to her book, and began turning over the pages.

"You seem very much out of spirits," said her mother, regarding her for a moment, as she bit off her thread "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, mamma, I'm only dull." The guileless Maria fell instantly into the trap.

"Dull!" exclaimed Mrs Hunt, delightedly; "I daresay you are! We're all dull. Everybody away, and this nasty rainy weather set in. Poor Mr Smith will have a bad time of it. I daresay he wishes himself safe back at home many a time."

"Do you know, mamma, even the Fultons are gone."

"Where are they gone?"

"Goodness, mamma, don't look so fierce! I don't know where. It was the Tolletons told me, and all they said was that they went off at the same time Mr Smith did."

"Gone after him, I'll be bound!"

Maria bridled. "Do you really think they would?"

"I'm sure they would. Papa, do you hear that? The Fultons are gone off after Mr Smith! Maria heard it from the Tolleton girls. Did you ever hear of such a thing in your life?"

"They did not say that, you know, mamma; but I do think they meant it. Lily said she wondered if they had gone together."

Dr Hunt looked grave. Formidable rival as Helen Tolleton might be, Miss Fulton, if a rival at all, was more formidable still.

"Did they say anything else about it, Maria?"

"No, papa."

Dr Hunt gave his wife a look which meant that, in that case, they had better not say anything else about it either.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SICK-ROOM.

Mr Smith was trying the old, old lover's trick of running away from his love. It had come upon him suddenly with giant force. It had surprised him; stunned and overwhelmed him like an unforeseen calamity. He saw nothing for it but to fly.

A second time to love and not be loved was bad enough;

but, at least, this time he could escape exposure and humiliation. At least he could bear his pain in silence, and in secret.

With these feelings he quitted the Hill about a week after Miss Tolleton's accident, assigning no definite period for his absence, and thus occasioning endless conjecture, and some consternation in the neighbourhood.

Consternation prevailed at Fulton. The Admiral humphed, grunted, and confounded under his breath, while he looked at his sister, and took sweet counsel with himself, not daring to consult her. His rheumatism was insufferable; the Hall was damp, they must go off somewhere; and having hit on Mr Smith's trail, he did really and truly carry off the unsuspecting Cornelia, as Mrs Hunt declared, in pursuit.

Consternation, too, swelled in the bosoms of the Hunts; but there was another house where the blow was even less expected, and where it fell still heavier.

The Hunts after a time could rally and discuss the business, as we have seen, with a certain dubious serenity; but at Freelands there was little to be said, and nothing to be done.

Lily brought in the card, her face betokening disaster, and when Helen saw it she said not a word.

They had been talking much of Mr Smith. Helen wished to see him. She had been a week in her room, during which time he had called every day, and she felt sure that each visit had been a disappointment. He had expected to see her. Perhaps he thought she was even avoiding him. She must be wheeled into the drawing-room next day.

She now gave Lily her whole confidence. He was won; she felt convinced of it. His looks and words on that last meeting could bear but one interpretation, and she was now almost as impatient as her sisters to have everything settled.

Colonel Aytoun was disposed of. He might do his worst, and it was nothing to her. She defied him, and burned to exult over him.

The thought of the Hunts, too, was exhilarating. There was no broken heart in the case. They had all been of the same mind. The webs which had been spun to catch the

great fly who had buzzed into their circle, had been woven of one common material. Indeed Helen felt, and felt truly, that she had a far higher regard for the man, as a man, than Maria Hunt was capable of.

The idea of Maria! All of a sudden she felt a blaze of indignation that they should have dared to think of such a thing. They were certainly not modest. It would do them all the good in the world to be taught their place.

Then she took a mischievous amusement in picturing the lesson.

She called up a vision of the blank faces, the unbelief, the futile wrath. She made speeches, and put them into the mouths of Mrs Hunt and herself.

Mrs Hunt was to accuse her of tricking them. She was to own that she had. It was not to be supposed that she wished to have the attentions of any man made public. Eastworld was such a place for gossip, and, of course, it would have been very disagreeable to be talked about.

If Maria were mentioned, if she were blamed, as well she knew she might be, on that account, she had her answer ready. She knew it was nothing to Maria, and as it was a great deal to her, she had thought it fair to throw a little dust in their eyes. Mrs Hunt must forgive her. Of course if there had been the slightest, the very slightest reason to suppose that Maria cared, she would never have gone on with it. It was only because she was so perfectly sure of Maria's indifference that she had thought herself justified in saying as much as she had. Mrs Hunt, of course, would not be able to allow that it had been anything to her daughter, and could not well show that it had been anything to herself or her husband. She would be silenced.

Then there were the Fultons, and there were the Sauffrendens.

When she thought of the Sauffrendens she grew restless in her bed, longing for the time of triumph. She was better, she was well, she was quite fit to see her visitor. He was to be admitted. And at the end of the week she had actually obtained Dr Hunt's sanction for her removal to another room. If the library were turned into her temporary bedroom, there would be no obstacle to her being wheeled from it to the drawing-room, but he would not permit her to attempt walking.

Lily joyously undertook to superintend the arrangement, and followed the doctor down-stairs, making faces at him behind his back. If he knew what he was giving his consent to!

At the door she met Mr Smith. He was in the act of leaving his card, and there was a P.P.C. on it. Lily invited him in, but he excused himself, as she fancied, rather hastily. A few minutes explained the whole. He was busy, being about to leave home for a while, and had barely made time to come and inquire after Miss Tolleton. He hoped to hear that her illness was an old story by the time he returned.

Lily commanded her countenance, politely wished him a pleasant journey, and was glad to give a most favourable report of her sister. She had just received permission (with a glance at the doctor), to be in the drawing-room next day.

There was a momentary hesitation, but no withdrawal of his words. He begged his kindest remembrances, and took the seat which Dr Hunt offered him in his gig. The doctor too failed, when, in the language of Miss Taylor's spider, he invited his fly to "walk into the parlour." The fly flew away from them all.

Lily hoped she showed nothing. There was no one to tell her whether her face looked blank or not; she could only hope he had not been in the humour to observe. Nor had he; he did not even look at it.

He had come there with his speech fitly prepared, but it took all his nerve, and all his composure, as steadily to deliver it.

He had no eyes for the recipient of the message. What was it to her, or to any of them? It was of no consequence to any one but himself.

So he said what he had prepared, and departed, and Lily returned to the sick-room.

For some time after the blow fell, the sisters sat in silence, the one with her face turned to the wall, the other nervously turning over the P.P.C. card in her hands.

At last she spoke. "Is there any hope, do you think?"

"No."

After another pause. "What can it be?"

"I can't tell."

"Can it be anything about Colonel Aytoun?"

"I can't tell."

"Can he have been talking about you?"

"I can't tell."

"Oh Nelly, don't speak in that way! It sounds as if—as if—it can't be helped, you know. And after all, perhaps it may come right. If one could only find out what is wrong! If it is Colonel Aytoun——but are you *sure* you cannot remember anything? Did you never give him any sort of rebuff? You have a way sometimes of saying things that you don't mean, and he might not understand it. If you could but see him I am sure it would come right again. Can we not send and ask him here to-night, or do something?"

Then her sister turned round, and spoke sternly. "No, Lily, I would not, for the world; I won't have him asked. Let him come or go as he chooses. It's all over, that's plain."

Lily was silenced. She too felt in her heart that it was all over. Consolation would be a mockery. She looked at Helen and did not attempt it.

After another uneasy silence she rose, saying, "I had better tell papa and Carry!" and left the room, glad to get away.

Helen made no effort to detain her. To be alone was a relief. There was no one in all the world, least of any her youngest sister, who could enter into her present feelings.

She had opened her mind to Lily when all was bright and prosperous. She had spread herself out like a flower in the sunshine; and now, like that flower, when night fell, and the damp chill crept on, she folded her sorrow within her own breast. It was a real sorrow, and a real loss.

She had missed not only the wealth and position, which, when she first contemplated accepting Mr Smith, had been her bait; but over and above this there was something which, until now, she had not herself realised.

She had lost a great chance in her life.

She had lost an influence, the first for good her life had known. She had lost one who trusted her, one who believed in her, one who, strangest of all, respected her.

To be adored she was accustomed—to be simply respected was something new.

No one would believe that she loved him. She was by no means sure that she did herself. But she liked him to love her; and this one grain of comfort remained amidst the universal blight—love her he did. Of this she was convinced. He might, he probably would, soon get over it; she was not disposed to dream of any renewal of her influence, but it gave her a faint, faint sense of satisfaction to know she had once possessed it.

Mingled with these reflections came the dispelling of all those gay and vainglorious visions so lately indulged in.

There was to be no triumph, no happy modesty, no repressed elation for her. It would be all she could look for, if she escaped the sneers of those who guessed her failure. Glad was she now that her flattering whispers had deluded the Hunts. One thing was gained by the story of her accident having been suppressed. There were few, if there were any, who would suspect her.

Mr Smith and everything about him must henceforth be buried in oblivion; so far, at least, as that could be done, when he returned to live within two miles of Freelands.

Her active brain working thus, she nevertheless lay still as a stone. Lily, returning half an hour after, tea-tray in hand, found her as she had left her, one arm stretched outside the bedclothes, and her face turned to the wall.

It was so strange in Helen that she felt involuntarily awed.

It seemed natural to speak softly, to tread on tip-toe, and to make as little noise as possible. Her manipulation of the tea-things, and the tones of her voice, although she only said, "I have brought you some tea, Nelly," explained it all intelligibly. Helen, who ought to have been grateful, felt unreasonably irritated.

Lily meant well, and truly desired to share her trouble, but it was only of the most trifling part of that trouble that she had the smallest conception. Her woe-begone aspect was at once provoking and ridiculous.

"For pity's sake, Lily," said her sister, petulantly, "don't look as if you had heard of a death! It is no such great thing. The man has made a fool of me instead of letting me make a fool of him, that's all. It is highly to his credit."

Lily felt instant relief. Now that Helen could talk in

that mocking voice, and laugh in that bitter way, she was herself again. She was no longer to be feared; and having come down from her pedestal, they might at least have the comfort of wondering, imagining, and condoling together. She took another cup of tea herself, and climbed upon the bed.

"It is such a blessing," she began, "that nobody knows."

Helen sighed. Yes, it was. A poor sort of blessing, a small mercy, but still one to be thankful for. Had she known it, Mr Smith was at that very time hugging the wretched substitute to his own bosom.

"No one knows," pursued Lily, seeing that she was not repulsed, "and I don't believe any one will ever so much as suspect it——" Here she suddenly broke off, showing in her face that something had struck her.

Helen was alert in a moment. "Who are you thinking of?"

"It was only Philip," owned Lily, rather flustered. "And I don't believe he will, either. There was never much to see."

"He will not repeat it," said Helen, quietly.

"But I daresay he never even noticed. He was not looking out, you know. I think he's safe."

Helen made no reply. She felt sure he had noticed; she could only trust to his honour.

"And there's no one else," continued Lily, "not a creature. Even the Hunts still think it's the lovely Maria! Fancy, Nelly" (laughing), "if it should be?"

Helen threw herself over on her side impatiently.

"Oh, do take care! You know you were not to move that foot. You have hurt yourself now. Lie still and I will tell you what Dr Hunt will say. 'My dear, Maria has been——'"

It was impossible for her sister to restrain a sharp exclamation.

"I do wish you would not be so very silly! What has Maria to do with it?"

"Only, you know, that if it isn't you——"

"It must be her. But I tell you, it *was* me. It was no one else; it was me, and me only. If there had been no me in the world, it would never have been Maria!"

The contempt with which she said "Maria!"

"Poor Maria!" said Lily. "She is not to be expected to think so little of herself, and tastes differ. It is a possibility."

"It is not," said Helen, with energy. "Not a whit more now than it ever was. You seem to think that because—because it is all over, there never was anything. But I tell you there was. It was as I said, more than I said a great deal, up to the very end. Its having gone wrong now makes no difference. The very way he is behaving proves it."

"Why, then," said Lily, brightening up, "it may all come right again. What if we are making much ado about nothing, after all? It is quite likely, I declare. What fun it would be if you got a letter from him when he was away——"

"Don't be a fool!" interrupted her sister, angrily. "As if there were the slightest chance of such a thing!"

"It may come to pass, all the same. Why, if it is as you say, and you are the best judge of that, what could have come in the way? Something about Colonel Aytoun, no doubt. Well, that will blow over, and he will return to his allegiance. I believe he will—I do indeed. He is not the man to be put off for a trifle."

"And that is what shows me it is no trifle. Besides, I told him myself about Colonel Aytoun, and that was tided over safely. No, there is something else. Perhaps he thinks I have been telling him only the half, like those creatures in the Bible who died for it. I wished I had, at the time, but I did not. I told him the worst, of course not in detail, but so that anybody could understand. How glad I am now that I did it!"

"Why," said Lily, dubiously, "I don't see that you gained much."

"At least I lost nothing, and we know that it isn't that. I am glad to know Colonel Aytoun has not had a hand in it, whoever has."

Helen did not ask to be wheeled into the drawing-room next day, and Dr Hunt forgot to inquire if she had been there.

Both were thinking of Mr Smith.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A VACUUM.

PHILIP was the only person whom the sisters had thought could suspect anything. They had never dreamt of Lord Sauffrenden. Yet Sauffrenden knew more about the matter than any other human being.

When even the Hunts had been baffled in their efforts to discover the truth about the accident, he had chuckled a perfectly correct account of it into Philip's ear, coupled with the most earnest injunctions to say nothing about it at the Castle, and, above all, to keep the story from coming to the ears of that mar-plot Lorrimer.

He had brought Sir George back with him from London, and Sir George had inquired after Miss Tolleton, soon after his arrival, with a smile, which, to the good-natured match-maker, betokened ill to the match.

This was more than Sauffrenden was disposed to stand. It was hard enough on him not to be allowed to put his own finger in the pie, and preside over its internal arrangements; but to see another finger thrust forward stirring the wrong way, was what he could not stand by and see done.

He watched Sir George's movements like a cat.

All went well; his vigilance began to slacken. Mr Smith was daily at the Tolletons' door; and who so unprepared, who so filled with astonishment and wrath, as the lord of the manor, when on a sudden the bubble burst?

Mr Smith was off, Miss Tolleton still in her bed.

What had happened? How had it happened? Had anything happened at all?

Alas! he had nobody to answer these questions, unless it were Dr Hunt, whose authority was not always reliable. Milly would give him no help. To Sir George he durst not apply. Philip was useless. With a sigh he came to the conclusion that Dr Hunt was his only chance.

Well, he had a sort of tickling in his throat, and a disagreeable stuffiness in his nose, which he might as well see the doctor about. It was not worth while to send all that

way for a busy man, but he might call in as he passed the house himself that afternoon.

The symptoms disposed of, he soon found out all the doctor had to tell. This was not much. His version of the accident was by no means so correct as that of which his visitor was already in possession; but it was not for information on that head Sauffrenden came to seek.

"Very ungallant," said he, laughing, "in Mr Smith to take himself off, and leave the lady in such a poor plight—eh, doctor?"

"Miss Tolleton is going on very well indeed," said the doctor, gravely.

"No fear of that, in your hands. But he might have waited to see her down-stairs again. Such a true knight-errant as he had been, riding by just in time, and succouring the distressed damsel!"

"I don't imagine that Miss Tolleton will complain of his behaviour in any way."

"What! Eh! Has she been cold to him? Has he received his *congé*? Is that what you mean?"

"I am really not aware to what your lordship refers." Dr Hunt almost frowned. Had his interrogator been any one else he would certainly have knit his brows; but, as it was, he merely checked such undue, indecent eagerness by a gravity as profound as he had ever summoned for a deathbed.

Mr Smith's face, giving the message at his door, rose before him, nevertheless, with a disagreeable vividness.

"It is not so, then," Lord Sauffrenden went on, feeling himself unaccountably thrown back. "There was a report, you know—but, I daresay it never reached your ears—of his being a little touched in that quarter; and hearing of his running off in this way, I took it into my head to put the two together. It looked a little suspicious, you must own?" Here he regarded his companion inquisitively, wistfully.

Unkind man! There was not a shred of sympathy in his composition. He saw, he knew as well as possible what was wanted, but not a word was to be wrung out of him.

"People will say anything, you know, doctor, for a piece of gossip," continued the great gossip of Eastworld. "But I own I should be glad to know that poor Smith was not bitten—that he had not been ill-used by anybody?"

Immovable was the doctor's aspect, rebuke in every feature.

Thus pointedly addressed he could not choose but reply, but his reply was short.

"I never heard a word to that effect, Lord Sauffrenden."

How small we feel when we have been showing a little bit of fussy interest in our neighbour's concerns, and instead of meeting with any answering warmth, we are confronted by a chill silence, a withering stare, a impenetrable, misty, veiled face! It was almost too much for human perseverance, when that face pertained to Dr Hunt. But one more effort made the courageous besieger.

"Well, well, you ought to know; you are a friend of both. As for reports, I never care a fig for them. I know better than to think twice about a report. Most of them, like this, are fictitious from beginning to end."

At last the doctor roused himself: his time had come. Now, he considered, one good blow might be planted with effect.

"Just so, my lord; a fiction from beginning to end. As you say, I am happy to reckon myself a friend of both parties, and with ample opportunities for judging, that is my ultimatum. That Mr Smith was on excellent terms with the Tolleton family all the time he remained here, I know for a fact, and that he continued to be so up to the last, I had the proof of my own senses. I happened to be present during his last interview."

Here was something at last; a reward for long-suffering. *Patientia et perseverantia omnia vincunt.*

"Well?" cried Lord Sauffrenden. "Well?"

"There was nothing to relate, my lord" (mildly surprised). "Mr Smith bade the ladies 'good-bye' in the ordinary way. I merely mention it to dispel any suspicion that he had, or ever had had, any such intentions as your lordship hinted at."

"Then it was all nonsense, of course. Glad to hear you say so. Now I must not keep you longer." And having thus given in his hearty concurrence in the verdict, the disappointed inquisitor took his leave.

Once outside the door, however, his note changed. "My good friend, you are—to use a mild expression—as blind as a bat. No intentions indeed! If he had no intentions,

after paying such attentions" (he paused to gather up his indignation into proper terms), "he ought to have had them, that's all I can say. It's easy to talk of no intentions. I call it a scoundrelly thing to do. How would the doctor have liked his own daughter to be treated that way, though he could talk so coolly of the poor *T'ss?* I should like to have asked him to put that in his pipe and smoke it!"

Then he sought Captain Wellwood.

"What do you say, Phil? Is he off, or has she refused him?"

"I don't think she has refused him."

"You think he's off?"

"Well, I do."

"What in the world is at the bottom of it?"

Philip was silent.

"Have you any idea?"

"Yes, I think it's Aytoun."

Sauffrenden's eyes were opened.

Colonel Aytoun had kept very quiet during the past week, and had never repeated his call at Freelands, but he had been working out his plan of making friends with Sir George Lorrimer, and had at length attained his object in doing so.

Sir George, easy and unsuspecting, had not hesitated in exposing Miss Tolleton's tactics, and only that afternoon had put Colonel Aytoun in possession of them.

The affair had rather amused him. He could never think of the passage of arms at Sauffrenden without an inner laugh. He had even gone so far as to remember it two months afterwards.

But now the play had come to an end. It had collapsed rather flatly; and he related the circumstances with something of the shamefacedness of a narrator embarked upon an anecdote which he suddenly perceives is deficient in point.

Not so did it appear to his auditor.

For him the point was not only sharp, but poisoned.

Mr Smith and Helen! The conjunction had never once occurred to him. Mr Smith and Helen! Horrible! On her account, and on his, equally unbearable.

At that moment his new anger against her exceeded and

almost eclipsed his old anger against him. The one was fresh, warm, and bubbling, the other stagnant.

Mr Smith had dared to love Emmeline, and dared still to pity and regard her. He would not be duped beyond a certain point. He was a popular man. He was high in favour with those who shirked his, Colonel Aytoun's, society, and try as he might, he could not do him a mischief.

Consequently he hated him.

But Helen was still worse. She had charmed him. She had had the enviable lot of attracting his notice, and instead of being grateful she had laughed in his face!

He was neither a magnet to attract, nor a chain to bind. He was no bar to the end she had in view.

The man he had once supplanted he had no chance of supplanting again; and she might accomplish her desire, and he his, without let or hindrance.

No one could say nay. He might be made happy even yet, with a wife still more beautiful than Emmeline had been, and now, Emmeline was paled and faded. Youth, lustre, enchantment, might all again be his, while only the old, battered, dusty end of life remained for Egerton Aytoun.

It was this which made him stamp his foot under the table, as his fingers clutched the wine-cup above.

Sir George had pronounced the matter to have no further interest; it had come to nothing after all. But Sir George had nothing at stake. Colonel Aytoun could not so easily dispose of it.

He was enraged with his own stupidity. What had he been about, not to have discovered this which was so much to him, when it had been plain to a heedless bystander?

If the mischief was done, it was done now. There was no hope of putting a spoke in the wheel, had Fortune once begun to turn it. Despite all assurances, he felt a sinking presentiment that it was too late.

Mr Smith away, Helen in bed, what could be done? There was no possibility of getting at either of them.

Sauffrenden was not to be borne any longer; and, disgusted with everything and everybody about it, he quitted the neighbourhood next day, dragging with him his ill-fated wife.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HELEN'S REFLECTIONS.

THE relief experienced by those left behind was great.

There was no more bolting out of doors the instant meals were over; no stumbling over each other in the hurry of escape. No more whispered entreaties, "You take him to-day," and conditional promises, "If you will to-morrow."

Sauffrenden once more yawned, and idled, and lounged about the passages as he loved to do; and Philip was to be found, as of yore, hanging about the terrace and conservatory, instead of hiding in the coverts of his own room.

The house was itself again.

Sauffrenden, however, had his grief. He mourned for the Tolletons.

He looked at his own camellias, his own forcing beds, and longed to send something to the sick-room. He worried Philip with constant and fidgety inquiries, and dared his wife by talking before her face of the accident and its serious results.

Mrs Aytoun's account of Helen had certainly not been such as to change Lady Sauffrenden's former opinion of her. Emmeline had grown confidential since the days when she attempted to picture the Abbey a happy home. She spoke openly, and, alas! truly.

Her story needed not any colouring from the spite of a malicious husband, or the trampled-turning-again of a desperate wife; it was the plain, unvarnished statement of the girl's mad folly.

Every one about the Abbey could have told the same. Emmeline did not exaggerate when she affirmed that it had been the talk of the neighbourhood.

All this had been duly retailed into Sauffrenden's ear, and it must be confessed that he found it very delightful.

He loved to know the worst of people, but then, tenderly as he inclined his ear to the tale, it found him as tender, as merciful a judge. It was the very interest he

took in his brother men, the very sympathy he felt in their concerns, which made him first yearn to know their failings, and then filled him with compassion for them. There was this divine in the man's nature, he did not love sin and he did love the sinner.

It would have filled his eyes with tears had he been able to look now into Helen's sick-chamber.

There she lies, forbidden to move, yet unable to be still. Tossing over and over, wearying and wounding herself, wondering that she gets no better. Night is worse than day to her. She has nothing then to divert her thoughts, and they fly about, and buzz hither and thither, and sting her whenever they can, like angry, frightened wasps. The more she tries to drive them away, the more irritated and venomous they become.

Why do they all turn against her so suddenly? How is it that everything she has ever done seems all at once to be wrong? Do other girls vex and chafe over their lives as she does?

There was that young Lance, and Buckley, and Gordon, and hosts of others besides poor Walter, who really cared for her more than half the rest put together—how she had gone on with them all!

Some had her hair; some, flowers she had worn; some had gloves; one or two even letters. How foolish she had been to write those letters! Painfully clear rose some of the expressions in them before her now. Theirs she would burn: that precious packet which had often caused her a secret thrill of exultation; it too stood up and condemned her.

It was their fault, of course. They would fall in love with her, and how was she to help that? She had only flirted a little in return, and with some it had answered, and with some it had not—exactly.

They had made themselves, and her too, rather ridiculous.

Ha! ha! ha! All of a sudden she would burst out laughing in the midst of her penitence.

Visions of doleful visages saying farewell over faultless neckties and unimpeachable shirt-fronts, rose before her. The pushing forward, the hustling each other for her smiles. The gloomy sighs breathed in the background;

the jealous looks; the little mean insinuations; the open frown of the Colonel; the weak sneer of the subaltern.

Of these were the sparkles in her cup of pleasure composed. And now, how good she had been going to be! She had intended to put away the whole cup, sparkles and all, and take another in her hand.

She had made up her mind to astonish the world by marrying Mr Smith, and to astonish it still more by making him a good wife.

Her old life she had meant to have done with. There were other kinds of pleasures to be enjoyed, and of them she would have had the full benefit.

Mr Smith's character had given ample hope of this; and in return she would have been a model of graceful accommodation to his wishes.

He was a religious man, that was certain; therefore she had resolved to be, if not exactly religious, yet seriously inclined. A regular church-goer, and a teacher at Sunday-schools. (An ivory prayer-book and fan in summer, furs in winter.) He was so nice, so kind, and so pleasant withal, that it had seemed a perfect Providence his being thrown in her way, and her having taken to him from the very first, as she had done.

He was not at all the sort of man she would have expected herself to take to. It was the veriest epicureanism in coquetry which had set her on. Then she thought he might do. Then she began to like him.

She took credit to herself for the whole proceeding. She was sorry for the past; she wished to do better. She desired to be out of temptation—safe, happy, and respectable. This way she had carved out for herself, and a glow of self-approval within her pronounced it a good one.

Oh, why was she not to tread the way? It was too hard, too discouraging, to be thus stopped short upon the threshold. It was enough to make her turn her back on goodness altogether, to have it making itself so very disagreeable.

Her sisters thought her changed, and she was proud of it. She had baffled Colonel Aytoun by her honesty, and disarmed Mrs Hunt by her prudence. She was certainly turning over a new leaf.

But these consolatory reflections had all their dark side.

Where was the use now of her good resolutions? Where was the use of trying to enter in at the strait gate when it clanged in her face? It was the cruelest, silliest stoppage that ever was.

CHAPTER XXX.

COLONEL AYTOUN'S DINNER-PARTY.

WEEKS now slipped by almost unmarked in the neighbourhood of Eastworld.

Mr Smith's disappearance and Helen Tolleton's sprained ankle had ceased to be two nine days' wonders.

The Sauffrendens were talking of their Easter party; Captain Wellwood growing daily more interested in the spring meetings; Dr Hunt reaping a small harvest of relaxed throats; and Mr Rodney doing all he could to induce people to keep Lent.

There was certainly little going on to lead the flock astray.

"We must have Rosy down at Easter," said Lady Sauffrenden to her husband, "as the Aytouns stopped her coming at Christmas. Shall you see her to-morrow?"

"I can, easily; I shall go there to luncheon. Phil wants to see his old chum Holker, so he can go to him."

"Is Philip going up with you?"

"Yes. He was going the end of the week, but I got him to make it to-morrow, not to let me go alone."

He never liked to go anywhere alone. If he had not Milly, he must have somebody. Milly, as a rule, avoided the London days, and therefore he was constantly on the strain inventing reasons for inveigling other people thither.

With Captain Wellwood he succeeded best, with the curate worst. Mr Rodney could not be brought to see that a clergyman was conferring a positive benefit on his parish by becoming a member of the University Club.

Now it curiously happened that one of the first people whom the two friends encountered as they left Paddington Station, was Colonel Aytoun.

The Colonel had on his best smile, and instead of responding to their cool and hasty, "How are you's?" by one of the same nature, he stopped, and held out his hand.

"You are the best people in the world to come across, you two. I have just seen your neighbour Smith, come back from his travels, and engaged him to dine with me to-night. Come and meet him. Lorrimer will be with us too. Smith is at their house."

"Of course we will; very glad to come. No engagement, eh, Philip? What's your hour? Eight?"

"Confound me! I could have bitten my tongue out for every word it spoke!" cried he, afterwards. "Why did you not stop me, you old good-for-nothing? I looked to you, and you wouldn't say a word to help me out. There's an end of our snug evening. How could you let me, Phil?"

"My dear fellow, how could I not? What could I say? You had your acceptance cut and dried while the invitation was hardly in being," said Philip, sulkily.

"My acceptance! What is my acceptance? You know well enough I never can refuse. I had to make it the heartier because I was racking my brain all the time to try and remember some excuse. You might have seen that."

"I saw it plainly enough."

"Well, why did you not help me, then?"

"Simply because I couldn't."

"To meet Smith too!" said Sauffrenden, fuming. "As if I cared to meet Smith! I never wish to see him again. I consider he has used that poor girl exceedingly ill, and she lying there, on her sofa, all this time!"

"You don't suppose she is pining for him?" said Philip, sarcastically.

"That's not his business. She might be, for all he cares. I wish that Aytoun was at——and Lorrimer too! What can make Long George go to him?"

"Perhaps, like us, because he could not get off."

"Such a party as we shall be!"

"Humph!"

"I shall be very cold to Smith, I can tell you. I have no idea of a fellow playing tricks of that sort. At his age he ought to know better."

"Do you want this hansom?"

"Well, yes—we had better. That vile dinner has spoilt our whole day!"

Colonel Aytoun might have heard every word they said without being much enlightened by it.

He knew as well as possible what to make of Lord Sauffrenden's abundant acceptance, and Captain Wellwood's gloomy face. It was not for their pleasure his hospitality was proffered. He had his own ends in view, and to further them this chance meeting appeared the greatest piece of luck in the world.

Mr Smith had only returned to England a few days before, but Colonel Aytoun had been on the look-out for him. His professions of esteem were louder than ever. He would take no refusal. "Mrs Aytoun would be quite indignant with him if he went back to the Abbey, and told her that their old friend would not come near them."

Not to offend him, they had to accept. Sir George did not care. To him Colonel Aytoun had never shown his cloven hoof, and he thought other people painted him blacker than he was. He agreed to go with indifference.

The object of the meeting was a simple one. It was to afford Aytoun an opportunity for putting an effectual bar between Mr Smith and Helen. Sir George Lorrimer's presence was indispensable, for Sir George, when appealed to, would be unable to deny what was to be alleged—nay, he would be forced to yield his testimony to the truth of the statements. But the addition of Lord Sauffrenden and Philip Wellwood to the party was beyond what could have been hoped for.

He almost shook with satisfaction. He trembled lest the delicious cup should by any chance slip through his fingers. He counted the half-hours of the day.

"One of papa's friends indeed, Miss Helen! I wish you may not repent having one of papa's friends for one of your enemies!"

Of all her taunts, this had rankled in his bosom deepest.

Thus it was that our dear, good, humble-minded friend, who fancied himself the solitary keeper of his secret, and was doing his best to crush it out of his heart, and hide it out of his sight, was all at once in the company of three other men, each of whom knew something of the same, and not one of whom knew the truth.

The dinner passed off as well as could have been expected. The host, although he scolded and scowled at the attendants, smoothed his brow, and oiled his tongue, ere he addressed any of his guests.

The early delicacies of the season were set before them, and had it not been for the company of their entertainer, the other four might have enjoyed themselves very comfortably.

Lord Sauffrenden indeed did his best to show disapprobation as he shook hands with Mr Smith, and even walked round to the other side of the table to avoid sitting next him. But then Sauffrenden's disapprobation was always so mild, that it might well be doubted if it was observable to any one but himself. Captain Wellwood certainly did not second him.

He had never been hearty in his reprobation of the culprit, and an imaginative person might have conjectured that he was almost too well inclined to be lenient. He warmly welcomed his neighbour home to Old England again, and hoped they should soon have him back at the Hill. Sauffrenden frowned at such mistimed, superfluous cordiality.

It was not till the wine had circulated twice that Colonel Aytoun thought his time had come.

They were none of them drinkers; temperance was one of his own few virtues, therefore they would not sit long. Sooner, however, it would not have been wise to begin.

His cheek slightly flushed when the pause came for which he had been waiting, but no one would have suspected the effort with which that jaunty tone began.

"By the way, Smith," said he, "you left a sad reputation behind you among the good folks down at your place, when I was there at Christmas. Whew! They were all up in arms. A hornet's nest. Really, you know, it is time for you and me to be giving up these little amusements. It's all very well when one is young, but you gay bachelors never know when to stop."

"He's going to catch it now," thought Sauffrenden, deeply interested. "Serves him right! I'm glad I came!"

Mr Smith inquired what the reputation was that he had left. His thoughts reverted to Miss Fulton, hints about the Admiral having already reached his ear. He was

annoyed, but not discomposed. He did the lady justice, she had never thought of him.

"You disclaim it, eh?" continued the Colonel, jocosely as before. "But that's of course. There she is, you know, drooping away; never left her room since you deserted her, and only whispering to her very, very intimate friends how shamefully she has been treated; and how she feels she can never have the heart to leave her chamber again; never go out to see that beautiful place, that fine house that she had set her soul on being the mistress of!"

"You are still talking in enigmas, Colonel. The only lady who has been confined to the house since I left—at least, so I was sorry to hear from Sir George—is Miss Tolleton. Her sprained ankle has been a more serious affair than any one would have dreamt of."

"He's in for it now!" chuckled Sauffrenden, again. "I'm glad I came!"

"So it's a sprained ankle!" replied Aytoun, lifting his eyebrows. "Ah! Never heard it called by that name before."

"I hope," said Mr Smith to Philip, "that it is well by this time?"

"Oh yes. That's to say, she can't get off the sofa yet, the doctor says. Great stuff, you know."

"The whole thing, of course," said Colonel Aytoun, "we know better, don't we, Smith? What's a sprained ankle but a pretty little make-believe to shut people's eyes?"

"Coarse brute!" thought Sauffrenden, disgusted. "I'm sorry I came."

"Miss Tolleton," said Mr Smith, trying to speak unremarkably, "is so far above such insinuations, that Colonel Aytoun can be only in jest, but it is safest not to jest with a lady's name."

"In jest! Never was more serious in my life!" cried he, with an air of protesting. "It's the talk of the neighbourhood; and some say, though of course that *we* don't give in to, that a certain good friend of ours did not behave exactly as he ought on the occasion."

"The talk of the neighbourhood, Colonel Aytoun, is very often merely the talk of the person recounting it."

"Well hit!" murmured Sauffrenden. "Glad I——"

"Well, if you won't believe me, ask any one here. I

heard it all when I was down there, and I am much mistaken if some of the present company could not tell us more of the matter if they chose. She swears she will have you yet, when her courage is high; and falls to tears and despair, and all the cruel treatment story, when her spirits fail. By Jove, man! why won't you have her? There she is, wooed and won! A ripe pear ready to fall into your mouth. Open it, and be thankful! It will shut hers, at least. She might rate at you, like the rest of them, every hour of the day, for some misdemeanour or other, but at all events she couldn't accuse you of the unpardonable sin, the capital crime, of being insensible to her charms. And in truth, my friend, when I come to think of it, perhaps you did give her some cause to complain. Perhaps you were rather often found at her front door. Eh? Wasn't it so? Ha! ha! Sly! sly! Too bad! And it wasn't the first time, more's the pity. Poor girl! she has had her disappointments before. That makes it all the harder to be borne. Well, I——beg your pardon?" to Sir George Lorrimer.

"I did not speak," said Sir George, gravely. He had uttered an inarticulate expression of disgust.

"You think her to blame, perhaps? Oh, we should be lenient on a sweet creature like that. Don't you be afraid, Smith; don't be put off for a trifle. And then you see you are in for it now, whether you will or not. She won't let you off now. And you should have been on your guard too. It is all very well, having a little mild flirtation, if it can't be misinterpreted; but you gay Lotharios, you marketable articles, should remember that there is more expected from you. No giving rise to false hopes; no, no."

Colonel Aytoun was no nice observer. He thought that on his victim's stony face he read the stupor of despair. He had had his swing. He had said nearly all he had to say. What now remained for him was a simple business enough; he had his witnesses ready, in case the prosecution were resisted.

With one accord they had all held their tongues.

Sauffrenden was by turns glad he had come and sorry he had come, but the grossness of thought and language in which the charge was made, at length weighed the scales too

heavily down on one side for them ever to rise again. He was shocked to the last degree. He stared into Aytoun's inflamed eyes as if he were a wild beast come for him to see. He turned to Mr Smith, and saw with a throb of delight that he was about to speak.

"And by George!" he murmured to himself, "he looks dangerous."

Mr Smith began. "This has been a very entertaining rodomontade, Colonel Aytoun. The brilliancy of your fancy—*hold your tongue*, sir!" suddenly roared he, springing to his feet. "Do you dare to insinuate that you have mingled any earnest with your—your most amusing jest?"

"On the contrary, my friend, I have not mingled one atom of jest with my earnest. It is all earnest, sober earnest——"

"You—infernal—liar!" said Mr Smith, slowly.

"Oh fie! What would the fair Helen think if she heard that! From such a respectable, religious——"

"Religious! You polluting——"

"No more names, please. We make allowance for a little blowing off the steam at first. But a friendly hint like this—if you don't believe me, ask these gentlemen."

How he blessed his luck which had sent them in his way!

With an evident effort the other mastered himself.

"Am I to understand," he said, in a suppressed voice, "that there is any one here who has concurred in the—the sentiments, the slanders which have just been forced upon us?"

An uneasy silence—downcast eyes. He looked from one to the other.

"Tell him, Lorrimer," said Aytoun, blandly, "what you thought on that happy occasion when you took luncheon with the lady."

"I think now, sir," replied Sir George, warmly, "that you are grossly misinterpreting and exaggerating anything I may have said to you on the subject."

"Without the least intention, then, I assure you. But you are here to speak for yourself. Will you kindly tell our somewhat hasty friend your own opinion? I think, on the whole, it is not unlike mine in substance."

Sir George was now looked at by all; and the afternoon

at Sauffrenden rose distinctly before the minds of two, at least, present.

"I will own," he said, hesitatingly, "that I thought Miss Tolleton not disinclined to my friend; nor, to be plain, did I think him altogether disinclined to her."

"You thought she wanted to catch him?"

"I never think such things, sir," said Sir George, haughtily.

"Not in those words, perhaps," rejoined Colonel Aytoun, slightly taken aback; "but it amounts to the same."

Sir George set his lips, and his friend's face changed. "If you wish for further confirmation," continued Aytoun, triumphantly, "here are Lord Sauffrenden and Captain Wellwood."

"I—I have *nothing* to say, sir," interposed Sauffrenden, hastily. "I have the—the highest regard for Miss Tolleton."

"Another?" said Colonel Aytoun, with mild surprise. "She is a most successful young lady, certainly. I had no idea Helen numbered Lord Sauffrenden among her admirers."

"She will number me among her defenders, Colonel Aytoun, and that is sufficient."

"Ah! it's a pity your wife won't call on her, then."

"There is a—a misunderstanding——"

"Exactly; so there is with mine. Little Nelly and I were great friends at the Abbey, but I could never bring Mrs Aytoun to speak to her."

"Colonel Aytoun is acting the part of a friend, is he not?" said a new voice. Philip could keep silence no longer.

"You too have been honoured in that way in your day, I have no doubt." Aytoun turned, quick as thought, upon him. "Most of us have had our day. It is Smith's day now."

"Colonel Aytoun" (none of them called him Aytoun), "you speak like the scoundrel you are——"

"No, no, Smith, I really cannot——"

"Do you dare to interrupt me, sir? You *shall* hear me. I know you well. I know what all this means. As if anything *you* say were worth a moment's consideration! As if you could blacken a reputation such as hers with any falsehood you——"

"Falsehood? Ask your friends here. The licence I have granted on account of your being a little put out, sir, must not be abused any more. I can't have falsehoods spoken about—at any rate, unless you can prove them."

"I can prove them."

"How?" A moment's embarrassment. Colonel Aytoun pursued his advantage.

"You are in too great a hurry. Now, to humour you, as you can't prove it a falsehood, allow me to prove it truth. Appeal to these gentlemen. Ask every one of them if you will, whether or not they believe that she wants to be your wife."

"Do you believe this, Lord Sauffrenden?" said Mr Smith, firmly.

Poor, compassionate, tender-hearted Sauffrenden!

"I did—did think once,—something—of the kind," stammered he; "but indeed——"

"Thank you; that is all I need to know. You, Lorrimer? Captain Wellwood?"

Sir George bowed, and Philip mutely followed his example.

"Then, gentlemen"—they all looked at him, his face was white, his voice trembled—"I must beg your attention to a few words on my part. I will be short. Nothing but what has occurred before you all could justify me in the course I am about to take. To Colonel Aytoun I do not address myself; from henceforth he and I are strangers. When you know all, you will understand. I love this lady. I love her with my whole heart—ay, with the same heart I gave to Emmeline just twenty years ago. He," pointing with his finger, "robbed me of the one, and now he would fain rob me of the other."

("Good heavens!" ejaculated Sauffrenden, under his breath, "what nuts for Milly!")

"But he is mistaken; this is not to be his delightful office. This tissue of malignity falls harmless; she does not care for me as it is. No, I know what you would say, Colonel Aytoun—it is not *me* but *mine*. Well, you shall see how that is; she shall have me and mine both, if she will!"

Colonel Aytoun started, and changed colour.

"Yes," continued his opponent, letting down his voice

again. "But that 'if she will!' Gentlemen, I do not disguise from you that in this hypothesis I have no hope. You are incredulous?" He paused. "Is there no one to do her justice?" Another pause. "She shall have it done, nevertheless. To-morrow evening will see her in possession of all that Colonel Aytoun affirms she desires, if she will deign to take them. Too well I know what that means. To-morrow evening will rather see me a despised, detested, cast-off, lonely old man." Again the voice trembled, but it still went on.

"One thing more. You hear this from my lips. It is no secret, and not to be kept as one; it is to be told, if ever this slanderous tale should be repeated in your presence. I call on you to bear witness to my words. She may have me if she will."

"Give me your hand, sir!" shouted Sauffrenden, restraining himself no longer, but rushing round the table, and all but clasping the speaker in his arms. "By—by—I must swear or I shall burst—by George! then, you are the noblest, and the best, and—and—I say I can't stand it! I never heard anything like this! If she doesn't take you after it, she is a fool and an idiot, were she ten times the handsomest girl in the county! And—and—I shall be proud of being your friend, sir, if you'll allow me—for I'm sure I don't deserve it—to the latest day of my life!"

"You may well be proud of it, Sauffrenden," said Sir George Lorrimer, smiling, and stretching his hand across the table likewise; "I have been, this many a day. Ah, you didn't know what he was! Now we must not make too much of him. I hope there is a happier ending in store than he anticipates."

"You too?" said Mr Smith, looking up at him, "*Et tu, Brute?*"

"No, no," said his friend, hastily, "not that. I am converted, believe me. All I mean is, that you are too humble, too modest—you think too little of yourself——"

A gentle shake of the head.

"Well," said Sir George, "we shall see."

And all this time Philip is sitting still as a stone in his chair, his eyes fixed upon the long empty plate.

How was it that, when he lifted them, they looked so blue and shining?

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN UNEXPECTED QUESTION, AND AN UNEXPECTED ANSWER.

NOTHING took place next morning different from other mornings at Freelands.

Seldom does anything happen to point out the great days of our lives. They come upon us in our ordinary paths, as we go about our accustomed duties, and look upon our familiar faces; and there is no voice to whisper that we shall turn to that date through years and years of time, as the day of our joy, or our sorrow.

It was a somewhat gloomy morning. Helen had slept badly, and breakfasted in bed. The post had only brought a few uninteresting letters, which had been quickly disposed of, and voted scarcely worth answering. Her sisters must go out, go to the village, bring her some lozenges, and some larger needles, and get the magazines which had been forgotten by the postman.

They were willing to go; and left her, after luncheon, lying on her sofa wearily completing an unfinished piece of worsted work which Carry had declared was really too stupid for her to go on with.

The sisters had been gone nearly an hour, when the door-bell suddenly rang, with a sharp demand; and two minutes afterwards, in walked Mr Smith.

She was not one to be easily startled, but monotony and confinement tend to shake the nerves, and her reception of him was not all that she could have wished.

Her breathing would flutter, and her voice stammer.

She was happy to see him again; hoped some of the others were at home; recollected they were all out; asked where he had been, then blushed for her impropriety, and faltered out instead, a hope that he was well.

Her visitor answered as became him.

His tone was tender, too tender had he not known what lay before him, as he expressed his regret at finding her still an invalid; and he spoke again and again of the happiness of being once more at Eastworld.

His travels he dismissed with an air of impatience.

He had felt obliged to go abroad, but it had been for nc good, and had afforded him no pleasure.

Might he take his old chair?

It was close to her head, and she had not thought he would take it, but it did not signify. All the past was to be forgotten. He was altered, and the alteration had to do with her. A rough morning suit had replaced his usual almost too carefully good attire, and there was no flower in his button-hole. His gloves—even his face was dusty. His neckcloth was half pulled out.

This to her eye bore but one interpretation. He no longer cared for the effect he produced in this house. It was the finishing touch to the thrust he had given her. Henceforward they were to stand on a different footing.

She had so well understood it all beforehand, that there was no second disappointment.

She began to talk, quietly indeed, but with ease and fluency. She was glad to see that at least the old appearance of friendship was to be maintained. It would help greatly to effect that belief in people's minds which they were so anxious to establish, that there never was, and never could have been, anything between her and Mr Smith.

As her spirit returned, his failed.

Here was the opportunity which he had resolved at all risks to obtain, when he set out that afternoon, given him without difficulty, and given him at once.

Now was the time to do his part.

He had said he would do it, and, come what might, he would not fail in his resolution, but oh, how difficult it was!

Five minutes, ten, a quarter of an hour passed, and he was still dallying with her work-table, asking after this and that, puttting needless questions, and returning absent answers.

The half-hour struck.

He felt that it *must* come. What should he say? What could he say? He had trusted to the moment, to something coming in his way which he might turn to account.

But nothing had helped him, her own manner least of all.

The precious time was going. Next moment, any moment might bring interruption, her father, her sisters —and the chance would be gone.

With a sense of desperation he laid his hand upon the smooth, slim, white one, whose taper fingers looked so transparent against the dark sofa coverlet.

How thin, how soft they were! Suddenly it struck him that the rings were wanting, and for something to say he remarked so much aloud.

"They are grown too large; they fall off my poor skinny fingers," said she, smiling. And then she began to think that he ought not to hold her hand thus, and made as though she would draw it away.

But, to her amazement, it was held fast, and held between both of his.

He would say it if it choked him!

"If I were to give you one—not too large—to wear—for my sake—would you wear it—and *here?*" touching the third finger. "Hush! Oh, don't speak! I know, I know, that you would not."

He shrank down, bending his head to the blow—only, would God it had fallen, and were over!

Was she struck dumb at his presumption? Was she hanging back in pity? Or was she merely obeying his request for silence?

Tick, tick, went the clock, and a blast of rain spattered against the window. One long, long minute passed.

She would not speak, and he must leave it as it was.

Was this to be his answer? So, he must yield up the dear possession that he held, and feel the sacrifice complete.

He drew himself up to go. Yet one word more. He thought it would be better, would really be better, and then all would be plain between them, and he need never trouble her more.

"Dear lady," he said, softly, "I know the pain it will give you to say it, but if it must be 'No,' the 'No' would be better said. I can bear the worst now. You need not fear that I—that you—that I will ever molest you. Once with me means for altogether. Say then, is it 'No'?"

Not a word said she.

"Then take your hand from mine," and he unclasped it gently.

The hand remained where it was.

He began to tremble. "Helen, what does this mean? What are you doing? Are you deceiving yourself, or me?"

His voice grew harsh and sharp. "Say No, *no*, NO, and seal my fate at once, but do not trifle with me, in the name of heaven!"

Her lips moved, but he could catch no sound. He turned, the tears were raining down her cheek.

"Child, can it be 'Yes'?"

"Yes."

His head fell down upon his hands, hers dropped from between them.

It might have been at that instant, or it might have been some minutes after, that voices, footsteps, bustle, was heard in the hall.

The walking party had returned. With an incoherent exclamation he rushed out among them, and passed by. They, flying to her for an explanation, found her crying.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MIRAGE.

"OH, it's delightful, delightful!" exclaimed Lily, for the twentieth time that evening, as she seated herself at the tea-table, alone with her eldest sister. "To think of its all coming right at last, as I said it would. Not that I ever thought it! I felt as sure it was all over as I ever did of anything in my life. And it was all a mistake from beginning to end! We shall find out what it was, some day. Colonel Aytoun at the bottom of it, I dare swear. I should like to see your face now, Mr Colonel! You ought to have a special invitation to the wedding. Oh! and Helen, nothing could be better than the way he has done it, after all. His disappearing, turning up in this fashion, taking us all by surprise, I declare it is quite romantic! And Nelly," she rattled on, "don't you see how lucky it is that we have none of us even seen him, except you? *That* will speak for itself. No one will have a word to say; the

Hunts, even, cannot accuse you. The dear, delightful man, I love him already; and 'All's well that ends well' shall be my motto to the end of my life!"

Helen made no attempt to check her rapture. It did not suit her, it jarred upon her, and she would fain have turned a deaf ear, if she could. But, not in this supreme moment of gratification, was she one to damp the sympathy of those around her.

She had borne the turn of Fortune well. She had so changed since that afternoon when, in the intoxication of anticipated triumph, she had revelled in the discomfiture of those who had tried to snatch from her the prize, that it was not till Lily recalled them to her memory, that she gave them so much as a thought.

Her heart glowed with happiness.

A new spring of life seemed within her. The world shone.

She could not work, she could not eat, she could not talk. She could but lie quiet thinking over it all, with her eyes still hot, but sparkling softly; wondering at herself and at him.

"We heard of his arrival," Lily had narrated, "as soon as we got to the Hunts. They had seen him. Mrs Hunt had seen him pass the Bains' window; and after we left them his man came flying down to the village—I suppose to get some things. The other, the butler, or whatever he may be, took up the luggage, the Hunts said. They had evidently been watching like cats; for Mrs Hunt said that, from everything she could see, he had arrived unexpectedly. She was was too much excited even to make a decent appearance of hiding it. Well, directly she said that, my heart jumped, for I thought, 'He has come after Nelly!' So we forgot all about the magazines, and came home as fast as we could to tell you, when, whom should we encounter in the hall but the man himself? Fortunately I had got your needles though, but I daresay you will do no more work to-night!"

"Did he speak to you?" inquired her sister.

"Not a word. He ran by like a ghost, and I thought he had gone crazy, or else that we had. The apparition was rather startling, you must allow. Then it darted into my head that he had been with you, and I guessed the whole. Is he coming here to-morrow?"

Helen supposed he was, but smiled as she owned she really could not tell. Their coming home had been unfortunately premature. He had left her in a fright.

"So much the better," said Lily, cheerfully; "we shall see him all the sooner back again. Now then, don't you want your tea?"

"Yes, I do." She drew in her chair.

"You have been able to sit up to tea a week, and to dinner two days," said Lily. "I daresay you will get on fast now. We must ask Dr Hunt about the drive; there will be no difficulty about carriages now," archly.

Helen smiled again, and sipped her tea. "I really am getting hungry. If you will ring the bell, I'll ask for some toast, I think. Tea and toast is my favourite combination."

Corker brought the toast, and with it a letter. The bearer, he said, was to wait and see if there was any answer.

"Is it from him?" said Lily, in a loud whisper, as the door closed.

"Hush! Yes. Now be quiet, and don't speak till I have read it. Go and tell papa tea is ready, and then I shall have peace."

She threw herself back in the arm-chair. Lily did not go, but as she held her tongue, she considered she had done what was required of her. It would have been too much to have given up the gratification of watching Nelly's face.

The letter ran thus:—

"When I spoke to you this afternoon, my dear young lady, I took you, I fear, too much by surprise. That it is probable you had no suspicion whatever of my feelings beforehand, I am but too well aware; and I cannot help tormenting myself with the doubt whether, had you had time for reflection, you would have given me the too, too kind answer you did. If I should be thus found taking an unfair advantage, all my present happiness would vanish. And if you should, under a false idea that anything in your previous behaviour compelled you to yield, have spoken what you would willingly retract, I should never forgive myself unless I gave you the chance of doing so. You never gave me the slightest reason to imagine you had any warmer feeling for me than that of friendship, and I can hardly yet believe that you pardon my presumptuous folly

in supposing so. Yet if it is, if it can be as I dare to hope, say so again. Then, and not till then, will my mind be at rest. My dear, think it over *well* before you decide." ("Bless the man—three sheets!" ejaculated Lily, under her breath.) Helen turned to the third.

"My man will wait to receive an answer. If he brings me word that one will be sent, I shall remain here awaiting it. If, however, during the hours that have elapsed since I left you, no misgivings have entered your mind, and it is made up now, as then, say that there is 'no answer,' and when next I come, I hope to place on your finger the ring you thought you could wear for my sake. In that case I shall not be with you till to-morrow evening, as I must go to town and choose it myself. J. S."

There was no ending beyond the simple initials of his name; he had found it too difficult to make one.

Helen read the whole slowly, then rose without deliberation, and rang the bell.

"I would have rung for you," said Lily; "you need not have got up."

"Never mind, thank you. Corker, please say there is no answer."

"Yes, Miss."

"No answer, remember."

"Yes, Miss," resentfully.

"That's emphatic," remarked Lily. "It is all right, I suppose?"

"All right; as right as it can be. What a man he is! I am proud of him, Lily, I can tell you. It will be no marriage for money, whatever may be said."

"Well, you would hardly have married him *without*," reflected her sister.

"That is another question. He does not marry me for my eyes, or my nose, or my mouth, but I doubt whether he would have married me had I been without any one of them."

"But perhaps he does marry you for one of them!"

"Tuts! Take some one else, then. Mrs Rodney, what a little pug nose she has! no one could say her Arthur married her for it; but if she had been without one at all, she might never have been his wife."

Helen mused a moment, and went on soberly.

"I believe there are more matches of this sort than people think. If a man or a woman is young and rather good-looking, and there is only a nice small fortune, it is kept altogether in the background. Every one calls it a love-match, and the he or she on whose side the money is not, is applauded up to the skies. Of course it is all right. They *can't* marry without money, and so they must only think of those who have it. And they may be very happy together, and very fond of each other too. But why, only because there happens to be more money, there should be supposed to be less love, or no love at all, I can't see. I believe there will be as much affection between Mr Smith and me, as between half the couples in the world."

"There will be plenty on his side, no doubt," said Lily, affectionately. Her love for this sister was her redeeming point.

"You must give over calling him Mr Smith now," added she, laughing. "What is it to be? John? I think I hear you. I know how it will be. 'John says this,' and 'John thinks that,' in the true matrimonial style. A pretty life you'll lead your John, poor man! He little thinks what is before him. He'll be carried about everywhere like a tame cat."

"He'll be nothing of the sort," said Helen, indignantly. "I hope I know better how to keep up a husband's dignity. I am much mistaken if he does not know better too. There is nothing of the tame cat about him."

"I wouldn't keep him then, my dear," said her father, who had entered in time to hear the last sentence. "It is not safe. I did not like his look at all the day we were there. There was a ferocious glare in his eyes, and he showed his teeth——"

"Who are you talking about, papa?" cried his daughters.

"Not the person we were, I am sure," added Helen.

"Person? Oh, I thought you said a cat. I thought you and Lily were talking about that nasty black cat up at the Hill. I wonder Smith keeps such a creature."

Mr Tolleton had an aversion to cats.

"They are the ruin of furniture," he continued, "and always getting into the larder."

"I like cats," said Helen; "and that was as nice a one as I ever saw. It was too clean to harm anything.

And I shan't turn against it behind its master's back as Lily did against Jumper. She had been patting Jumper and making a fuss about him one day when he came with Philip, and I wondered how she could, for his coat was soaking, and he was rubbing it against her nice new muslin, when all of a sudden she pushed him away as hard as she could, calling him an abominable creature for spoiling her dress! It turned out that Philip had left the room."

"I remember," said Lily. "I can't help laughing myself when I think of it. The mark of his horrid feet, and his face of utter astonishment! He has distrusted me ever since."

"I wonder what Philip will say when he hears of this," said Carry, who had been in the room for some time, but had not spoken before. "Do you think he will be surprised?"

"*I* don't," said Lily.

Helen did not answer.

"What if they should meet here to-morrow?" continued Carry.

"Mr Smith is not coming till the evening," said her sister. "Now, can any of you guess why?"

Guesses were made, but the truth was not approached. She had the pleasure of surprising them all thoroughly.

"The engagement ring!" cried Lily. "Oh, well done he! Isn't it delightful? Doesn't it bring it all so near? To think that only last night we were sitting round this table just as we are now, all so humdrum and so slow, and dreaming of nothing less than this! Do you remember, Nelly, you were talking of getting those mauve skirts turned for the summer, and how we could contrive bunches out of the unnecessary breadths? Carry and I will divide your skirt between us now, and have bunches to any extent. What a scramble we shall have for your clothes, and what a *trousseau* you will have!"

"Shall you need a very large one, my dear?" inquired her father, anxiously. "There is not too much money, you know."

"I had not thought about it yet, papa. But I certainly don't mean to spend much money. It will be far better to have few things, and good of their kind, than a great variety."

"Yes, and all the boots and shoes, and things of that sort, can be filled in afterwards, except what are wanted for actual use," said Lily. "There will be no need to go in for those heaps of underclothing that Sarah Gray had. Her mother said as she was marrying a poor man it was better to fit her out in that way, than to give her silk dresses."

"She had one or two very nice silks," said Helen. "I thought Mrs Gray very sensible about it. She gave her just what she wanted, and what she could really wear. It would have been nonsense to load her with useless finery."

"Well, but you aren't going to be a very poor curate's wife."

"No, and of course that makes the difference. I shall be able to afford anything I want afterwards, and I must have a few more gowns to begin with. But I mean to take a hint from Mrs Gray in this. I shall get what will be useful for me, and do without all that is unnecessary, as Sarah did. And I mean to take care of your money too, papa."

"You were always the best of girls in that way, my dear. I wish we may get on as well without you!" And he sighed.

"I'm going such a little way off," said Helen, cheerfully, "that you will hardly miss me. I could not well have come closer, unless I had eloped with the new steward at Sauffrenden."

"Ah, I wonder what the Sauffrendens will say!" said Lily.

"They have no say in the matter," replied her father, with asperity.

Helen smiled. "Perhaps they will be friends with us now, papa."

"Humph! They used us very ill, that's all I can say. I meet Lord Sauffrenden constantly, and he never takes the slightest notice of me, though I see him speaking to every one else in the village."

"He can hardly speak to you as a villager."

"He ought to speak to me as a gentleman."

"Oh, well, it is an old story, papa. They did not want to know us, and took the only way they could. There is

no need to rake it up now. I should not be the least surprised if they come forward at last."

"Why should they come forward now? It is too late. I went to call, called at once, the very day after they came. No one could have been more attentive, and that was how they received it! Rude was not the word. It was——"

"I wonder what the ring will be!" Helen changed the conversation.

"Diamonds, of course," said Lily.

"Yes, diamonds, I daresay. I must confess I shall enjoy showing that diamond ring to Mrs Hunt."

"She has not been nice," said Carry, in the tone of a judge summing up.

"She never is," said Lily.

"As if he ever would have thought of Maria!"

"Carry thinks he would much sooner have thought of her."

"I did not think anything of the sort," retorted Carry, sharply. "I was thinking of Mrs Hunt."

The truth was that she had gone alone to the Hunts, not long after Mr Smith's departure, and just at the time when the misgivings of husband and wife were making them very uneasy. Mrs Hunt had been overjoyed to catch the simple one of the Tolletons alone. A thorough cross-examination had been gone through, and too openly.

Carry had seen through it, and done wonders. Even her sisters had complimented her afterwards: and ever since, she had plumed herself upon the interview, and retained an acute impression that Mrs Hunt had not been nice.

The Fultons were next discussed at the tea-table. Helen, as she had always done, did Miss Fulton justice. No, it was not Cornelia; it was the Admiral. The Admiral would find himself in the wrong boat now.

"I never did like the Admiral," said Mr Tolleton, candidly. "He was always very bad to me."

"They were quite friendly at one time," said Lily; "but of late they have been drawing back more and more—I am sure I don't know why. I suppose we don't suit their old-fashioned notions. Perhaps, Nelly, if the Sauffrendens come forward, we may see them too."

"Old-fashioned notions are sometimes the best," said

Helen, gravely. "We have been wild girls, we three, but when I turn chaperone I hope to see you both sober down too."

Carry looked pleased at the idea of her needing to sober down.

She was always afraid of being thought sensible. "You have been sobering down yourself for some time," said Lily. "Don't get any soberer, or you will send me off in the other direction."

"I should be sorry to do that."

Lily looked at her sister.

"I don't know what has come over Helen, but the mantle of Mrs Smith seems already to have fallen on Miss Tolleton. It is he who has done it, I know," discontentedly.

"Perhaps it is," said Helen. "Never mind, Lily, you won't quarrel with me if I look sober in diamonds."

Lily's spirits were restored in a moment, and the evening closed happily to all.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

OUR FRIENDS' DISAPPOINTMENTS.

"MRS HUNT'S in a fine fuss about Mr Smith's coming back," said Miss Bain to Lyddy, as the two old maids sat together over their sewing. "I'll tell you what, Lyddy, there are some people who think all their geese are swans, and a swan would be an ornamental creature at the house on the Hill! He! he! he!" she finished off with a little cackle.

Lyddy stared at her sister, and tried to cackle likewise; but she had not caught the meaning of the allegory.

"Is Mrs Hunt so fond of Mr Smith, sister?"

"So fond of him, Lyddy, that she would do anything in the world for him. She even wants to find him a better wife than Cornelia Fulton."

"Goodness, 'Melia, not one of us!"

"No, indeed; I hope our behaviour would put a stop to

any ideas of that kind," said 'Melia, with dignity. "No one can say that you or I ran after him. Besides, for all his name is Smith, and nobody knows who or what his grandfather was, he is too fine a gentleman to be evened to us, Lyddy. He's for our betters, you know. It is the young ladies who are pulling caps for him. Now, can't you guess?"

Lyddy couldn't guess, and deprecated with an appealing glance her sister's contempt.

"Well, then, you are a dull thing!" said 'Melia. "Any one with half an eye could see that Mrs Hunt wants him for one of her girls!"

"'Melia! No!"

"Ay or no, that's what she does. Why, this afternoon she showed it so plain, that I had it on the tip of my tongue to say, 'Dear me, Mrs Hunt, he's all but engaged to Miss Cornelia!' Not that he is, you know, but just to see how she would take it. What a stir she made when she saw him pass the window! and it was, 'Oh! there's Mr Smith!!'" (dropping her work, and giving a lively representation of the scene.) "'There's Mr Smith!!' cries she. 'Indeed! and what may Mr Smith be to you?' thinks I. But you see I never said a whisht, and on she ran about him,—where he had been, how long he had been away, and what could have brought him back so sudden. 'And the girls will be pleased!' says she. 'Oho!' thinks I, then, 'the *girls* will be pleased, will they? So that's the story, is it? Then I think I know what it all means, mistress.' But you see, Lyddy, there are two words to that bargain, and maybe Mr Smith's word may be long of coming."

"Dear me!" cried Lyddy, enthusiastically; "he might do a deal worse. Nice young things, though not precisely handsome; and living close by. She would be under her mother's eye all the time. It would really be a most suitable connection."

"That's all you know about it, Lyddy. If I were Mr Smith, I know whether I should like to have her mother's eye upon me all the time! And as to his ever thinking of one of those slip-shod girls——if he is thinking of anybody, it's Helen Tolleton!"

"Sister! Helen Tolleton!"

The tone of amazement, remonstrance, reproach! Lyddy's faith in her sister was shaking.

"Ay, Helen Tolleton; just her, and no one else."

In 'Melia's tone leaked out nothing but unmitigated enjoyment.

"Mark my words, if he marries at all, it won't be till after he has asked her."

"Sister! But do you think he will marry her, then?"

"I can't tell, Lyddy—I can't tell whether or no she would have him; but worse boats than that have come to land. Now I have a notion that this has more to do with his coming back than other folks fancy," added she, mysteriously.

Lyddy pondered.

"What set you thinking of it?" said she at last.

"I had a suspicion that night of the feast."

"And you never told me!" with a note of complaint.

"Where were your eyes not to see it for yourself? But I didn't want to have it said about that we had set it going. The next thing would have been, that we were after him ourselves."

"I would never have set it going, I'm sure," murmured Lyddy. "What was it you saw that night?"

"You know she was behind in the pantry. Well, he was always poking about there, though he didn't go in; but I must confess that this only came to me after I had seen him speaking to her."

"I thought he never spoke to her at all."

"Ah! did he not? I think he did, though. When no one was looking. And I know where he sat when the magic-lantern was going on, though Mrs Hunt doesn't. But if I had never thought a thought about it, I should have found him out by the way he looked at her at supper."

"Well, you *are* sharp! To think of noticing all that! Why, I had enough ado to keep my tongue going, and do justice to all the good things besides. I never thought of Mr Smith nor his looks, not I. Except—well, yes—for a moment, when I could not take the two jellies, and I'm sure he thought it rude. But I really was afraid. One can't take everything, when the dishes never seem to end—but you do notice things in a wonderful way. And so he was looking at her at supper, was he?"

"His eyes were just fixed upon her from beginning to end."

"It would never do, sister."

"Why not, Lyddy?"

Lyddy shook her head.

"It may have to do, whether or no. Who's to help its doing? It's not for you or me to say. They must 'gang their ain gait,' as father used to tell us. Time was when the Tolletons held their heads with the highest, little though they are thought of now."

"Like ourselves, sister," with gentle melancholy. "If it weren't for the caddy and the old mull, I would sometimes forget we ever belonged to the Macbains. However," continued she, in a brisker tone, "that's neither here nor there. We have many mercies and ought to be thankful. I never thought to see that grease-spot come out of the tartan. Mrs Hunt was really most good-natured. And so you think Mr Smith will marry Helen Tolleton?"

"Na!" ejaculated Miss Bain, quickly, "I never said that; nobody can go that length. But I'll tell you who he won't marry, and that's Maria Hunt."

"Dear me, sister! That will be a sad disappointment."

"Like enough, Lyddy, but disappointments come to all. People shouldn't count their chickens before they are hatched!"

Thus lightly do we take the disappointments of our friends.

For sorrows, sufferings, and losses, we have sympathy, but why should we bewail disappointments? They are the lot of the aspiring; the fall of the high-minded; the offspring of presumption; the result of unreason; the corrective medicine after unwholesome food. Bitter may be the draught, but happy those to whom it is administered in due season.

Ah, but when it comes nigh us! When we writhe under the merciless stroke, the unsparing scythe that sweeps our schemes in sunder!

Is it nothing, then, to know that the easy assent which we gave before, it is the turn of others to give now?

Does this cause no fresh bleeding of the wound? Down in the shades of the Valley of Humiliation we can still tell what eyes are watching us, or not.

Helen Tolleton, in her great disappointment, had felt that if she were spared this, she could bear the rest.

She knew what sort of eyes would have looked down on her; cold, cruel, exulting, rudely familiar eyes. She saw them many a night in her dreams.

And now at last they vanished.

All through the hours of that long, light, flickering night which followed the eventful day, Helen lay awake.

She did not want to sleep. She was not restless. She was willing to lie still with her face turned to the window, looking out.

The clear serene heavens, the pale shadow of the moon on the garden pond, the hush, the calm over the land, were all in harmony with the peace which filled her soul. She felt a swell of thanksgiving.

Anew she planned the life that was before her; the easy, happy, good life.

Old shifts, and tricks, and stories thrown behind her; new graces, beauties, accomplishments, and adornments, hers.

It was impossible to cheat her fancy of its flights.

At length daylight broke, and sleep followed; and though filled by dreams fabling the truth, or distorting it into fantastic forms and shapes, still the sun was high in the heavens ere she unclosed her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"OH, MY LORD, HAVE YOU HEARD THE NEWS?"

APRIL fool's day. Not a breath of wind to stir the larches; not a passing cloud to darken even with April tear-drops. Birds jubilant in the woodlands. Budding hedgerows, primroses, violets over all the land. Sweet scents and sweet sounds. Sweet old England on a day like this!

Down stepped Lord Sauffrenden through the village with an elastic tread. All the world was right with him again. He had just arrived from London, prospered in his ways; and now had the dear delight in store of narrating to his wife, his friends, and the public generally (in confidence), the particulars of Colonel Aytoun's dinner-party.

All day before, he had been bursting with the intelligence. He had had no one to confide in. Philip had gone off somewhere, and he had been forced to remain in town. He was aching with desire for a listener, and a listener was now at hand; for Milly, whatever she might pretend, would enjoy the scene to his heart's content.

Nevertheless, as he passed the post-office door, he yielded a few minutes to turn aside and inquire for his letters. The evening post was in. His own bag would convey them to the Castle half an hour after his arrival; but what idle man likes to wait half an hour for his letters? Great men, busy men, hard-worked men, are fain to get away from the penny post; men who do nothing, never.

To Sauffrenden it was often the event of the day.

Was this why he was so often found in the little shop? Not altogether. He learnt a great deal there. He saw strangers; he heard talk. He loved to linger, sit down, chat, and look about him. He loved to feel he was welcome.

Welcome he was. They would not have known the place without him. Everything fresh was laid aside for his inspection. Every scrap of news served up, as it were hot, between plates.

The Hunts from their windows were his respectful watchers. Dr Hunt, so soon as he saw the grey shooting clothes disappear among the newspapers, would put himself in the way. Mr Rodney would sigh his very, very mildest sigh over so much wasted time. Mr Bartlett growl his faintest growl at the affront to the bank.

For they all liked him; they all cherished him. He was one of themselves; a father, husband, brother, son of the soil.

"Oh, my lord, have you heard the news?"

The postmaster knew he would call; had been waiting for him; would not have missed being the one to tell him first, for the world.

"Aha! it's out already!" thought Sauffrenden, beaming all over. "No, Fletcher, I have heard nothing. I have been away. Just come down by the 7.10."

"Indeed, my lord! You have heard nothing, then?"

"No; but I own there is something I should not be surprised to hear. I suspect it's that, eh? Mr Smith?"

"It is indeed, my lord," solemnly.

"You did not look for him so soon back among you?"

"No, indeed, my lord," still more solemnly. "And then this to follow!" added Fletcher, moralising.

"Why, man, you look as if it were his funeral. I think Mr Smith's friends have every reason to congratulate him."

"My lord!"

"I do, indeed. Why not?"

"Your lordship surely does not understand——"

"Perfectly, I assure you, and what is more, I approve."

The postmaster rubbed his head in perplexity. "It only happened this afternoon," he said, wistfully.

"Just when I expected that it would happen; either to-day or yesterday at least. I thought he said yesterday" (*sotto voce*). Aloud, "Come, tell me what you have against it? What do you pull such a long face about? eh?"

"We shall miss Mr Smith very greatly, my lord. He hasn't been long here, and we didn't care very much about him when he comed. But there's nobody on the ground, you and my lady of course excepted, that's grown to be more thought on."

"Well, so he ought to be. But you are not going to lose him?"

"We *have* lost him, my lord."

The postmaster stared at Lord Sauffrenden, who stared still more at him.

"Lost him! How have you lost him?" He could not make it out.

"The news is just come in, my lord; I thought as how you could hardly have heard it. Mr Smith is dead!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

NO HOPE.

MR SMITH was dead, and within an hour of his death there was scarcely a man or woman in Eastworld who did not know of it.

It came upon them like a thunder-clap.

They did not want him when he came, as the postmaster said, but they knew what he was when he was gone.

His praises were in every mouth. It seemed as though, when living, he had possessed but half his virtues; and dead, the other half had been supplied him.

He was dead! He had been alive in the morning, and at noonday; and when even came, he was *dead!*

They talked of him in the past tense. They whispered of what he had been. He was no longer present with them; he was no longer one of them. He was dead.

Strange! Awful! Terrible! The commonplace words resounded in every dwelling.

When had it been? Where? How? Who had been with him? Who had seen him?

Was it true? Was it certain?

Alas! it was too true, too certain. The words were yet upon their lips when another and another messenger confirmed the tale.

There had been no warning, no alarm. Not the gentlest note of preparation had sounded in his ears. He had been alive and well at five o'clock, and before seven he was gone.

Of course they had come for the doctor. But the doctor had returned home confounded, and sad at heart. It was all over. His remaining could be of no use. And by that time every one knew.

Lord Sauffrenden conveyed the news to his wife with a look almost of despair.

The Fultons refused to believe.

And at one house in the neighbourhood there was neither weeping nor wailing, neither question nor answer, but a great, cold, silent blank.

It was as though the bitter cup were to be twice drunk.

As a dream within a dream is first broken, leaving the dreamer happy still, because he fancies at least it is no illusion now—so had she been dreaming on.

Her first vision had been rudely dispelled. She believed she had awoke to reality. Alas! the second proved the more transitory phantasm of the two.

Slight, slight as the hope had been at the first awakening, it was hope indeed compared with this. "In the

grave," we read, "there is no hope;" no change, no return, no appeal, no reversion.

The sheaf was ripe for the sickle, and the sickle had cut it down.

At last small particulars began to creep out.

Mr Smith had been up to town again. He had stayed there only a few hours. He had returned by the five o'clock train, ordered his dinner an hour earlier than usual, and stated that he was going out in the evening.

The servants were of opinion that he had never seemed in better health or spirits.

After giving his orders he had gone to his room to dress.

John had taken him hot water, and remarked that he poured some out for shaving, which he never did at that hour, unless he were going into company.

He had reiterated injunctions that his dinner should on no account be later than six, and John had come down and told the cook; and the cook had been very cross when, at six o'clock punctually, she had sent in the soup, and a quarter of an hour afterwards her master had not come out of his room.

She had cried out about people talking to her of being in time, who had never been late in her life, and then keeping her fish on the fire till all the juice was like to be out of them—and at last John had gone up and tapped at the bedroom door.

The tap had been unresponded to, and he had tapped till he was tired.

At length he had peeped into the room. Not seeing any one, he had concluded that his master had stepped out; and was turning back to the door, when his eye fell on Mr Smith fallen down all in a heap, between the washing-stand and the bed.

He had tried directly to raise him, though greatly terrified, never having seen any one in a fit before. He didn't know whether they went cold in fits or not, but thought by his master's face he must be pretty bad.

He had called for help, but couldn't make any of the others hear.

He had got him on to the bed, and run down to fetch the rest.

The cook had said—or else it was Martha—none of them

could rightly remember who had said it, but at any rate they had all felt it, felt sure in a moment that it wasn't like any fit they had ever seen.

Mr Bowling and John, however, had unloosed his things; and cook had rubbed his feet with pepper and vinegar; and Martha had burnt feathers under his nose.

Then John had run off for the doctor, and they had all lost a good master and a kind friend.

Such was the household evidence.

As a supplement, they produced from the waistcoat-pocket a jeweller's box containing a lady's diamond ring.

Dr Hunt listened decorously and sadly to the end; but when he saw the ring, he started.

Ha! what was this? Whose ring was that? His hand fell to his side. His spirit went from him.

Then with a long, deep breath came reflection.

That ring told a tale. Those diamonds would never have been Maria's. If not Maria's, whose? Helen Tolleton's.

He felt as certain of it as if he had seen them gleaming on her finger.

To think of this having been in store for him.

He had had a vision of it, it is true; a foreboding, an ugly dream. He had seen Mr Smith's face giving the message at his door, in his nightmares.

But dreams do not always, do not often, come to pass. Weeks had gone by. His suspicions had been lulled; he had slept in security.

On the preceding day the house on the Hill had again received its master, and they were all anxiously awaiting what would follow; his wife in a fever-fret—Maria demurely conscious, ready to welcome change of any sort.

He had a note in his pocket for Mr Smith at the moment he received the summons.

Then came the doubt, the conviction, and the evidence. As he walked home his brain was in a tumult.

He would have said, no doubt, that he was far too much shocked to think. He firmly believed that he was stunned by such a blow. He had not had time to think of anything.

But the ring was before his eyes all the time, and he knew it, and was ashamed of it.

Was it possible? Absolutely true? Not only coming to this, but come already.

He had a sense, he could not help it, of danger escaped. He felt like a mariner rudely cast ashore, with the breath half beaten out of him—shattered, but safe.

Mrs Hunt, however, was loud in her woe and her lamentations.

Mr Smith! Their dear friend, Mr Smith! Their most particular friend, their nearest neighbour, their—their—she must not say what,—but poor Maria!

Who was to break it to her? How would she ever get over it? Dear, dear! she would feel it terribly. She would—— "The less said about that the better!" exclaims a sour, hard voice. Could it be Robert's?

She is involuntarily impressed. Why so? What does he mean?

"Don't go and make a fool of the girl to people, Polly."

Make a fool of her! How was she making a fool of her? She was doing the very best thing for her she could.

"She will never get over it, Robert."

"Fiddlesticks! She was hard enough to get into it."

"She had got quite fond of him."

"She must get quite fond of some one else, then."

"How can you speak like that, my dear! How can you be so unkind? The poor thing——"

"Now I tell you what it is, Polly, once for all. If you go and blazon it abroad that our girl is dying for love, or any other nonsensical rubbish of that sort, you'll make her the most egregious laughing-stock that ever was. Now, I warn you. I have my reasons."

He was not so unkind as she thought. He wished to spare her.

She waited a minute, then oozed out into a doleful whine. "Just when he had come back, and we thought it was to be all right. If he had stayed away altogether! But as if to make it the very worst——"

"Worst! If you talk of worst——" interrupted her husband; "but I will say no more."

Again she looked at him.

His tone was biting. His eye was bloodshot. He was evidently disturbed in his inner man.

And he had dined so peacefully off the boiled fowls, which she had treated them to, almost confessedly in honour of the day. No shock, no blow, albeit of the severest, could

have had power to disturb the digesting of that gentle meal.

He was unreasonably cross. Was she not suffering as well as he? And why should they not suffer together?

And why was she to be deprived of the consolation of consoling Maria? And was it not hard that it should never be known that the Hill with all its glories had so nearly been reigned over by the doctor's daughter?

She made one more effort.

"I must say, Robert, I think it is but due to the girl that people should know of the attentions he paid her. They were talked about, you know. Even the Tolletons——"

"The Tolletons!" snapped from his lips like the shutting of a steel clasp. "You had better not make a fool of yourself to the Tolletons!"

"Robert! You made me jump!"

"You will have it, ma'am; I would have kept it from you if I could. The Tolletons, if you must know, lose far more in Mr Smith than ever you or your daughter would have done."

The sheet she was turning fell from his wife's hands.

She was awake now, and soon, too soon, she knew the whole.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A NEW PART.

SITTING by her husband's side, and hearing from his lips the blasting of her last grain of comfort, Mrs Hunt gave up all powers of resistance.

Her rock had fallen, and now there was not even sand for her to cast her anchor into.

Words failed. Mechanically her fingers drew the sheet again upon her knee, but the needle moved not. She never turned a sheet again without its giving her a shiver.

When the first pain had become somewhat deadened, however, she could form a resolution. Come what might, no word of this should ever cross her lips. She might think

her own thoughts, and suspect her own suspicions, but to no human being would she ever own them. She would boldly scout the idea of Helen Tolleton; and if the Fultons were mentioned, shake her head.

As far as she could, she would avoid the subject altogether.

Such reticence, however, was soon seen to be impossible. Every one was talking about the ring. It was the romance of the death. It gave a tone, a flavour, an essence of delightful mystery to the sad occurrence. It was all that was left of Mr Smith to talk, think, wonder about.

Mrs Hunt, called upon for her opinion, gave it roundly.

The ring! Yes, of course she had heard about the ring. The doctor had told her, and he had been the first to whom it was shown. What did she think of it? What every one else did, she supposed. Then she paused.

Would there be a whisper of Maria? Maria was never once hinted at.

Miss Bain boldly ranged herself on the side of Miss Tolleton.

She was wondered at, protested at, insinuated at, but she held her own. Ay, Helen Tolleton! Just her and no one else. Pray, why not? What had Mrs Hunt to say against it?

Only this, that Mrs Hunt would never have been more surprised at anything in her life. The very last person in all the world who would have entered Mrs Hunt's head. The very last likely to have attracted Mr Smith's notice.

All this 'Melia understood perfectly.

"She went half mad at the notion!" chuckled she to Lyddy, afterwards. "By which I knew she had got an inkling of it beforehand. Something or somebody had given them the hint."

It was after this that the doctor's wife began to propagate vehemently that idea of an abstract Mrs Smith which she maintained for some time.

Those many weeks' absence had not been for nothing. They should soon have seen a mistress of the Hill, they might take her word for it. Some one he had met abroad. Some relation of Colonel Aytoun's, or Sir George Lorrimer's. No doubt it would have been a great thing for the neighbourhood.

It was a thousand pities, poor man! At his time of life, racketing hither and thither, and all the business of courting a lady of position, had been too much for him.

Who the lady was would no doubt be announced in the papers; but she owned she would have liked to have heard it from himself.

The words slipped through her lips. They were lying there in keeping with the mask she wore, and were spoken almost before they were thought.

She had not meant to tell absolute falsehoods. But when every look, and nod, and shake of the head was unreal, the glib asseveration rose spontaneously.

Yet she knew that to have heard it from himself would have been more dreadful to her than anything else she could have imagined.

Well, what did she gain? An assenting face, which burst out laughing the moment her back was turned. That was all, Mrs Hunt. You were too old to learn a new part in the play.

It was generally felt, however, that although Mrs Hunt might not believe in what she said herself, there was truth in it.

They gave no credence to her faith in the story, but nevertheless it was their own opinion.

Mr Smith had been seeking his mate elsewhere.

He had probably come down to make new arrangements; and new times had been in store for the villagers.

As this conviction forced itself upon them, their regrets grew.

It was ordained otherwise; but they must say, to their poor minds it seemed a sad pity.

And they wondered that Providence should be so overbearing; and though, of course, it must be submitted to, yet it was under protest, as considering it a somewhat strange and short-sighted dispensation.

If Mr Smith was to come there at all, he ought to have been permitted to stay.

Who would be the next? Who would come after him? What would become of his money? What would be seen of his relations?

Talk, talk went the village; clack, clack the gossips; and in the midst of them all, in the house he had built, in

the home he had hoped to gladden, lay the silent, speechless, unrevealing clay, from which the spirit had departed.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"I WOULD RATHER DIE THAN GET IT IN THAT WAY!"

"AT least she will have that!" The dejected tone came from Lily Tolleton, and she alluded to the diamond ring.

Poor Helen had been defrauded of everything else—her husband, her house, her jewels, and her carriages; but at least, for all she had gone through, "for all her pains, for all her cares," she would have that.

Little indeed was a single ring for one who had so lately contemplated whole sets and caskets of precious stones. It had been regarded simply as the earnest of what was to come; and behold! it was all that was left.

Still Lily felt that it was something. Two days had passed during which she had thought there would be nothing. Since his engagement it was all but impossible that Mr Smith should have made a fresh will, bequeathing to their sister any portion of those worldly goods with which at his marriage he would have promised to endow her, and the whole brilliant future had faded like a mirage—not only a prospect that was no more, but one that had never really existed at all.

Helen had refused to discuss the subject. It would do no one any good, she had said wearily, and she would rather not.

Now, however, she roused herself. Lily had adverted to the ring in her presence.

"I don't understand what you mean!" said she. "What have I to do with it?"

"It is your ring, Nelly; the one he went to London for."

"It would have been mine, but that is nothing now."

"Why nothing? Of course it is yours, all the same."

"Very well if you will, but I shall never see it."

"Do you mean that they won't give it you?"

"How are they to know?"

"If they don't know, we can tell them. You can show them the letter."

Helen's eyes flashed. "The letter? What can you be thinking of? Show his letter!"

"Why not? You need not show the whole; just enough to prove the fact. The last sentence about the ring, and the signature, would be enough."

"If I thought I could do a thing like that!" cried Helen, "I would—— And what would be the reward? A trinket I could never bear to look upon."

"You have had other trinkets you never could bear to look upon. You——" Lily stopped short, frightened. "There now, don't be angry. I am so vexed myself, that I don't know what I'm saying. I thought at least you would have that."

"I am not angry," said Helen, in a low voice; "but you must never say those things again. It is strange that you should think it likely to make me forget myself a second time, being reminded that I did once, and have been ashamed of it ever since."

"Yes, I know," said Lily, penitently; "but this is quite different."

"It is different, but I am different too. So mercenary——"

"Not altogether mercenary. You had a great regard for him, and would like to wear it for his sake."

"I had such a regard for him," replied her sister, "that his very memory would stand up and condemn me if I did. Wear it for his sake! If it had been a shabby bit of brass should I have liked to wear it? If it had been an ugly widow's cap, or a great crape veil! No, thank heaven! I know myself better, and I am not such a hypocrite as that!"

"Perhaps they may find out, and send it to you," suggested Lily's sanguine spirit. "You would wear it if it were given you, I suppose?"

Helen made no answer for a few minutes. Then she burst out suddenly—

"The way he trusted me! The way he believed in me! And he thought me so good, and so—— Oh, it is hard!" cried she, sobbing. "I shall never have such another

chance—never! I should like to have his ring, no one knows how much; but I would rather die than get it in that way!"

Helen speaking like that! Helen weeping for her lover! It was incomprehensibly awful. Lily stole from her presence, rebuked and abashed.

At the Castle they were talking about the ring too.

Sir George Lorrimer, who was the dead man's sole executor, had brought it there, and, showing it to Sauffrenden, suggested, "Don't you think she ought to have it?"

To his surprise Sauffrenden demurred.

"The only thing is," said he, "that it might be considered as an insult."

"An insult!"

"Supposing he had not asked her?"

"In that case he would surely not have bought the ring. You heard what his own anticipations were. And I can only say," continued Sir George, with warmth, "that there never was any one in this world who was more certain to have said what he meant. He was as true——"

"You mistake me altogether," cried Sauffrenden, eagerly. "I have not the shadow of a doubt that he was sincere. But might he not have taken a little hope, picked up his courage; you know we all gave him to understand what we thought!"

"But why should you suppose the offer had not been made?"

"Because I can't find out," said Sauffrenden, honestly, "when it could have been done. I have been inquiring everywhere, and there seems to me to have been no time. He came down on Wednesday, wrote her a letter that evening, which she never answered. Then he did not leave his house again till he went to town next day, driving straight to and from the station."

"But the letter—the letter was enough."

"She never answered it."

"No matter. Depend upon it there was some arrangement."

"An arrangement to see him, that's what I have made up my mind that it was. Perhaps he bade her not answer if the hour suited. He was going out, no doubt, to her, the night he died."

"With the ring in his pocket," said Sir George, thoughtfully. "It was very unlike him."

They began to talk about the funeral.

"Ah! the funeral!" said Sauffrenden, sighing. "Who would have thought of that last Tuesday? There he was, as hale and hearty as the best of us. And, by Jove! what a voice he had when he jumped on his legs, and knocked the decanter over. I think I never heard three sweeter sounds in my life than those three words he called Aytoun! To think of its ending in this!"

Sir George sighed too.

"And we had all been abusing him," continued Sauffrenden, "and only just put it right again. Even Milly would have been pleased. I wish she could have known before, if it had been only for a day. The most disappointing thing! If it had taken place before all this came out, I should not have cared half so much. Poor dear old boy! To think it has all happened since Tuesday morning! We did not half like meeting him you know, Wellwood and I. We were quite cross with him, and thought he had behaved very shabbily. I shook hands with him very coldly indeed, and so did Philip. I wish we hadn't now."

"He didn't notice it, I'm sure, Sauffrenden."

"He could hardly have helped noticing it. I showed what I felt pretty pointedly, I know. He must have thought us nasty, capricious sort of fellows; and if there is one thing in the world I dislike to be thought, it is capricious."

His compunction made the other smile.

"Really, my dear fellow, you take it too much to heart. What you may have felt I can't pretend to say, but no one would ever have suspected it was anything so very virulent from your manner."

"He would, though. He knew how friendly I had always been. I shall never cease to be sorry for it."

"At any rate you made it up with him afterwards."

"Yes, I hope I did that," brightening. "I think I showed him the difference then. I tell you, Lorrimer, when I saw the turn things were taking, and that great brute getting brought to book at last, I felt myself getting awfully queer. It wouldn't have taken much more to have made a baby of me on the spot!"

"Nor some others either, or I am mistaken."

This was delightful. The simple fellow thought he meant himself, and pressed his arm approvingly.

The reader will scarcely be so credulous. Sir George's nature was not emotional. It is hardly necessary to whisper that the allusion was to Philip Wellwood.

Philip had not yet returned to the neighbourhood. He had gone off after the dinner-party, leaving a note for his friend to say that he had run down to Ryde with a cousin, who was buying a yacht, and wished him to inspect it.

He left his address there, and bade Sauffrenden send him all the news. He thought he might stay a week or two, and go round the island. Some fellows he was once quartered with were at Newport.

Sauffrenden, in some dudgeon, had had his last day in town alone; but his spirits had returned on reflection that he had now not only his wife to tell about Colonel Aytoun's dinner-party, but would probably have Philip to tell about Mr Smith's engagement.

Mr Smith had not been dead many hours before he sent off the full account of his untimely end.

The next day but one saw Philip at Eastworld and at Sauffrenden.

"You are come for the funeral," said his friend, greatly pleased. "I'm glad you have. I thought you would."

If he had had his way not a man in or near Eastworld would have been absent.

His grooms, his gardeners, his footmen, all saw that it gratified him when they asked to go. He sent invitations through Sir George Lorrimer to half the county, and he never to his dying day forgave the Admiral, who was actually at the Hall, but who, after confounding the card, took no further notice of it.

The funeral was all that was left of Mr Smith, and enough could not be made of it.

Every one he met going to attend, had his approving nod, and he scanned the faces in the churchyard even while he walked beside the coffin.

There was one rough-looking fellow whom he did not know. Fletcher would tell him who it was.

"From the north, my lord." Fletcher anticipated him. "Says he would have come if it had been a thousand miles

He has his tale to tell, and has been telling it to my missis and me; and though his jargon ain't easy made out, yet it's worth the listening to."

"Is it about poor Mr Smith?"

"Yes, my lord, it is. It seems this Haword, or Hawood, or whatever he calls himself, had known the poor gentleman that's gone many a year. He's from Liverpool, and talks of the river, crossing the river, which it seems he has to do, morning and evening, to his work. He was going over one day, it's more than thirty years ago, he says, when he was just out of the hospital, and they thought he was going in a consumption. His cough seemed as if it would shake him to bits, and there was a fog and an easterly wind. Mr Smith, as was a young man then, turned and looked at him several times, and at last says he, 'You have got no greatcoat, friend.' And then, without another word, off with his own, and put it on him."

"Ah!" ejaculated Sauffrenden. "Well?"

"He made him keep it till next day," Fletcher proceeded, not too lucidly; "'and,' said he, 'you should have been welcome to it, but I'm not able to afford another.' But by the next night he, that's Mr Smith" (seeing that his auditor was getting mystified), "brought him a bran-new one, and said it was a present from the gentlemen on 'Change. He had collected the money among them."

"I never knew he had been in business," said Lord Sauffrenden.

"I'm coming to that, my lord. He was only a lad then, as you may say. This was to be the making of him. It seems there was some old gentleman who saw the affair of the coat, and took a fancy to him then and there. And the end of it was, he left him his fortin'," concluded the narrator triumphantly. He had got to the point of his story at last, and it justified him.

My lord's face of astonishment! My lord's unqualified belief and satisfaction! It was worth anything.

"He's in the back parlour, now," suggested the postmaster, softly.

Then the stranger was summoned. He corroborated all that had been said. Mr Smith never liked it talked about, but it was well known in the place he came from. Mr Smith was respected everywhere. He often used to go and

see them all. He had no relations to speak of, no near ones at any rate. His family had been well known, though there were none left now. They had been terribly sorry to hear of his death—that was, himself and his mates. He had said he would come to his funeral if it was a thousand miles. "May I make bold to ask, my lord," he concluded, "if he was a friend of yours?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Lord Sauffrenden, heartily. "I hope he would have grown to be much more of one, but he seemed scarcely come among us ere he was gone."

"To think," he added, mentally, "that I should ever have been cold to him!"

"Ay," said the man, "that was always the way. Come or go, he had friends everywhere, and friends of the right sort too. They say he knew a prince once, when he was in furrin parts, but I don't know," added he, cautiously. "It was only folks' talk maybe."

"It was very likely true," said Lord Sauffrenden, rising. "The prince would be well off, if it were."

Then he left, and the stranger gave it as his opinion that if all lords were like that, they would be none the worse of a few in his part of the world.

"Never spoke to one before," said he; "but they seem a deal more free than our Liverpool gents. My word! there aren't many of them that would sit and answer you like that. Ay, we could do with a few more of that kind, up with us."

The funeral over, every one wondered what was to come next.

Mr Smith and Eastworld had shaken hands; they would see his face no more.

They had grown accustomed to his grey wideawake and thick whiskers, his quick step and ready smile; they had even begun to feel a pride in him. If he had only been one of themselves!

Well, he could not help that; all that could be done had been done. He had come among them; that, in itself, was a token for good. He had voluntarily settled down, struck root, and even, it now appeared, desired to bud and blossom there.

His children, at least, would have belonged to the place; and the house on the Hill might have been to posterity an ancestral mansion.

All this was now changed; they had laid him beneath the sod, and what was to come next?

The house was to be sold.

That was the first whisper, and anew hopes and expectations were kindled, that the next advent would prove a family.

They were ready with new faces for the new-comers. New recommendations for a new master; bows and scrapes, if it might be so, for a new madam.

Ere the churchyard was empty, tongues were wagging. All were for the future: the past was buried with the dead; as useless, as unprofitable.

Lord Sauffrenden's thoughts reverted to the diamond ring.

Since his conversation about it, he had made a new discovery, and ever after he felt ashamed of not having made it sooner.

It was the greatest oversight he had ever been guilty of, and he could not understand to the last day of his life how he came to have been so blind.

Not only had Mr Smith been at Freelands, but he had been there some time, and he had seen Miss Tolleton.

How in the world came he, Sauffrenden, not to have heard it before?

Now, of course, there was no doubt about the ring.

Sir George could not remain to take it, and hesitated whom to ask.

"Suppose I go," said Sauffrenden, earnestly. "You would not send valuable jewels by a man?"

"It might be awkward for you, after what has passed."

"One should not regard that, at such a time, and there is really no one else."

"Captain Wellwood? He is a friend of the family."

"Philip! Oh!" trying to hide his disappointment. "Ye—s; if he will. But I don't believe he will. If he *likes* to go, of course he would be a good one to do it."

Philip testified neither liking nor disliking. He would take the ring if Sir George wished. He was going back to Ryde next day, so would take it that afternoon.

"And what shall you say to her?" inquired Sauffrenden, wistfully.

"That's of no consequence, I imagine. There will be no difficulty in explaining the circumstances."

"Be sure you say he thought she would refuse him."

"I don't see how that would be to the purpose."

"Shall you tell her how we came to know about it?"

"I don't know that I need."

"Shall you say anything about Aytoun?"

"I don't know."

"Shall you say——"

"It is of no use asking me what I shall say, Sauffrenden; I have never thought about it. What can it signify a pin's point? If Sir George wishes it, I will take the ring, and what I say or do not say on giving it, cannot be of the slightest importance."

"I shall be much obliged if you will," said Sir George, taking a look at him. ("Half way in, my friend! Now it will depend very much on how she behaves this afternoon, whether it's over the head, or a dry jump out on the other side.")

"I told you he would not like it," said Sauffrenden, ruefully watching his friend depart. "I told you he would not care to go, and I think it was almost a pity he was asked. A young fellow, you know, on such an occasion, is, to say the truth, hardly appropriate. You or I would have been far better."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AT THE TURNING-POINT.

And thus Helen got her ring, though, alas! the giver came not with the gift.

She took it very quietly, at once allowed her engagement, but said nothing of her loss.

Captain Wellwood, she was well aware, was not one who would sympathise, even had she wanted sympathy, which she did not. He could not participate in the feelings of her family, nor would he believe in her own. He would think, as all the world thought, that she was rightly served. Perhaps he was even laughing at her in his sleeve.

It was true, she saw no trace of exultation in his look; and in the "Miss Tolleton, I believe this belongs to you," with which he simply placed the case in her hand, there was a tone of respectful gravity which almost touched her.

But she knew Philip. He could be anything he chose. She herself possessed a like gift, and had been proud of it once. Of late she had come to think she had been better without it.

That day, at least, she would not act, let him say or do what he would.

She would not even sit down. She stood and received the ring, gravely bending her graceful head, and thanking him in cold, sweet tones for the trouble he had taken. Yes, she would like to have it; it was kind of them to send it to her. She begged he would thank Sir George Lorrimer.

And then she laid down the case.

Philip began to falter.

He wished she would speak to him, he wished she would look at him, he wished to goodness she would not stand there with that impenetrable face, as if she was not either sorry or glad, or possessed of any feeling at all.

He would have given a good deal to know what she was thinking about. Failing that, he would have given something to be safely out of the house again.

Her manner seemed to say, "Go, your presence is intrusive; your speech impertinent. It is only because I am sad and sick at heart that I tolerate you."

If she would only have looked at the ring! If she would only have listened to his explanation! But he began, and saw her frown, and then he made up his mind that it would be best to leave it all unsaid, and go.

She gave her hand, and another mechanical "thank you," and he left the room.

What could it mean? It set him wondering, wondering.

Was it possible, barely possible, not to be ridiculous, that she could have entertained any feeling of—of love for the man she had elected for her husband?

He did not think so; he could not bring himself to think so.

Regard there might be; he had even taught himself to imagine that, mingled with it, there had been a shade of

warmth, a kindly glow of gratitude, or something of that sort. But beyond this, no. No, Helen, no; it would not do. It was too much to expect that that should be believed in.

She had done very well. But the drama had been played out; and behind the scenes how much would be found real?

Faugh! Whose voice was that in his ear?

Mrs Hunt's.

"A fine afternoon, Captain Wellwood. You have been at Freelands?"

How in the world had she crept so close? He had heard no step. He had been absorbed.

Yes, he had been at Freelands.

"And the ladies there in as great force as ever?"

"They were not in any particular force."

"No? Well, I thought Helen a little pale still, a little quiet perhaps, but then, you know, she has had a moping time of it lately. No balls, no amusements, no gentlemen. Bless me! what am I saying? But I fancy," with a knowing little laugh, "that Miss Tolleton's predilections are pretty well known. The races will set her all right again."

Captain Wellwood disdained her too much to reply.

"His Majesty did not even vouchsafe me a bow this time," said she to her husband afterwards. "He jumped over the stile and up to the Castle, as if he was lord of all. I wonder they put up with him there, I am sure. The rudest, most disagreeable man I ever met in my life!"

Then, softening a little, "Poor dear Mr Smith, how different he always was!"

"Pshaw!" ejaculated her husband, impatiently, "I'm tired of Mr Smith. Mr Smith was all very well, but one hears nothing but his name now, from morning till night. If a man gets drowned, or shot, or hung, he is an angel in the eyes of some people. For pity's sake let Mr Smith rest in his grave in peace, Polly."

The petulant outburst surprised them all.

"I am sure he may rest for me," replied Mrs Hunt; "but I must say what I always thought of him—from the very first, as the girls know. Dead or living," she continued, with a sense of magnanimity, "it makes no difference."

"Don't be too sure of that, my dear."

"Sure! Why not sure?" with a swift, cautionary glance at her daughters. "What should make you say that? You have the oddest ways, my dear."

"It is just as well that you should know——"

"Now, girls, don't dawdle about any longer. Go upstairs at once, and make yourselves tidy."

"Stay—let them wait a minute; they had better hear it as well as you, since it will be all over the country to-morrow. That diamond ring has gone to Miss Tolleton."

"She never has! It isn't true! That girl would swear black was white, or white was black, to serve her end! What fool has believed her? Who has dared to give it her? The brazen-faced——"

"You had better not, Polly. If people hear you raving like that, they might wonder, you know. I thought, perhaps, you would not be so ready with your tongue in poor Smith's praise when this came round to you!"

"Ready! It was not *him!* *He* never thought of such a thing! It is she who has got up the whole farce from beginning to end, and to think that she should get this too! Oh, what idiots people are! Who gave it her? And who told you?"

Of course it was Lord Sauffrenden who had told him.

Lord Sauffrenden, debarred from the pleasure of conveying the gift, could at least enjoy the satisfaction of proclaiming it.

He remembered his last interview with Dr Hunt. He caught him in the village. Openly he exulted over him. Cruelly he probed him.

The doctor was still smarting when he returned to his house. No wonder his wife's note of praise made the blood from the wound spurt forth afresh. No wonder he surprised them.

She was now eager to know the circumstances.

What business had Lord Sauffrenden to interfere? Just because he was a lord——

"Lord Sauffrenden had nothing to do with it."

"Then who had?"

"Sir George Lorrimer. I told you it was handed over to him."

"And she goes to him, and makes a long mouth, and

cries, and pretends—I have no patience when I think of it! A married man! He ought to be ashamed of himself! To be cozened by that woman!"

"I daresay he was. But as it happens, he has not seen her."

"How did she claim it, then?"

"It appears she did not claim it."

A cry of disbelief. "She not claim it! If she swore that upon the rack, she wouldn't take me in! Who did claim it, if she didn't? Her father, I suppose. Sent off to the Castle with weepers in his hat, and they watching him from the windows. It made me sick to see him at the funeral, spying and fawning."

Dr Hunt scratched his chin, thoughtfully. This was a new view of the case.

He had been distinctly told that Miss Tolleton had not mentioned her engagement, and put in no claim to the ring; but not a word had been said of her father.

"There may be something in that," said he, at last.

"Tell me word for word what was told you, and I'll soon find out the truth," demanded the virago.

"What Lord Sauffrenden told me?"

"Yes, of course."

"That as Mr Smith was engaged to Miss Tolleton, there was no doubt the ring was meant for her, and Sir George had accordingly sent it."

"By whom?"

"He didn't say."

"But did you not ask how he knew that he was engaged to her?"

"Of course I did. I said no one here had heard of it, and hinted as broadly as I could that I should like some proof."

"Well, what had he to say to that?"

"He looked rather my lord, which he doesn't often do, and said that he and Sir George were satisfied on the point. They had not learnt it from the Tolletons. Yes, by the way, he said the Tolletons. Their authority was indisputable. The engagement had taken place the day before he died."

"Humph! Don't believe a word of it. She'll never get a husband, try as she may."

"She was pretty near it this time, at all events. I told you before what I thought, Polly; it is of no use your taking it as if it were a new thing."

Here Maria silently looked at her mother. She and Clare had not spoken a word, and they had been overlooked altogether.

But Mrs Hunt caught the look, and felt obliged to take more heed of her words.

"Only after he was dead, my dear, and I thought it wasn't worth while mentioning it. We never thought—that's to say——Maria," said her mother quite gently, "you had better go up-stairs now."

Maria went, and one other question was put.

"Will everybody know?"

"Yes, of course."

And thus it came to pass that Mr Smith's last wish was carried out. He had cleared her name. Not, perhaps, as he had thought to clear it; but still in a way dear to her pride, in a way that made her bless his memory.

He had been proud of his choice. He had proclaimed it even within the few hours of life left to him after they parted; for thus she had erroneously read Philip's explanation.

Her heart swelled at the thought.

And those to whom he had given his confidence had not been backward in avowing it. They had, of their own free-will, accorded her the place she would have held, and sent her the ring she would have worn. It was too much. She would never have sought it. She had forbidden her family to say a word. She had let it all go, and what she felt or suffered was for herself alone.

Those whose impertinence led them to address her on the subject, gave it as their opinion that Miss Tolleton was curiously altered. It was nonsense to suppose that she had cared for that old man, but certainly she had shown more proper feeling on the occasion than could have been expected.

"Wait till the autumn, and you'll see her cast off her properness, as an adder does its slough," said Mrs Hunt, grimly. "She will come out in greater style than ever, after this fine piece of work. I have no faith in reformations."

There were those, however, who, when they heard her say this, thought of sour grapes.

Miss Tolleton was still young, and well, she might improve.

They hoped it would last, that was all.

And what does she herself think?

"Oh no, I am not changed, not really changed in the least. I have been thinking all this while that I am, and others think so too, and yet down in my heart I know they are wrong. The change, if there is to be one, has yet to come. I fancied I had grown to dislike the old life with its wild wicked ways, and after all it was only because the new one tempted me more. If he had not been what he was, I should have seen it sooner; but it was so difficult to see that there could be any attraction with him except just the money, and that, I might have had before. I thought I was so wise, and nice, and good to take to it all.

"And now that there is nothing to look for, and nobody to lead me, and no chance of anything better, am I to let go all, and drift away to what I was before? What shall I do? Which way shall I go?"

This was the burden of her heart.

She must make her choice, once for all. She was no longer blind and ignorant; she had eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

She saw, darkly it is true, but nevertheless she saw before her the two paths. For a while the narrow one had presented itself to her eyes as the more charming of the two. All the pleasant things had been along its banks, all that was bright and bewitching within its gates.

But could she make up her mind to enter as these faded from her view?

The prospect had changed. It looked dull, cold, uninteresting. Could she ever be allured to it again?

So good had God been to her, that hitherto her own base passions had been the bonds which His love had used to draw her forward, and by them she had been brought to the turning-point.

The bonds were withdrawn. She perceived the ground on which she stood.

Ah! what a check was there! Her feet rested on no pilgrim soil. Her journey had not yet begun. She was left looking on that shorn, bare, stony road no longer draped in rainbow tints, and what was she to make of it? The

other lay close at hand, decked in tinsel gewgaws. One on her right hand, one on her left. Heaven help her wandering, wavering feet!

God be with thee, poor Helen! This is thy offer of mercy; this is thy day of grace. Thy great, wonderful, inestimable opportunity; thy life.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER.

LORD SAUFFRENDEN TO CAPTAIN WELLWOOD.

"DEAR PHIL,—I don't know how in the world I have been so long in writing to you. I have sat down dozens of times, but always got up again. Very glad to get yours, all the same. What sport you must have had! I would have given anything for a day after those jungle fellows. Rather a different sort of thing from potting pheasants, I should think! We have just begun that old story here, but they are not so good as usual. The new fellow was not as clever with the young ones as old Hislop. As you see the papers, you won't care for any public news. If a dissolution does come, it might be rather awkward, but I think we could weather it. By the way, that reminds me that Fred Percy (who has just got into the Foreign Office) told me to *be sure* to tell you to see his brother, if you were anywhere near Peshore—I know that's not the way to spell it, but there's nobody to tell me what is. He has had the fever, but is all right again, and would be awfully glad to see you. So go if you can, and send him a line about it, like a good fellow. It was queer your coming across Aytoun. I suppose, since his wife's death, he is quite the gay young bachelor again. I don't wonder at Lord M.'s giving him the cold shoulder—*do you?* All here much as usual. Poor Smith's house sold at last, and the new people, a *varnish-maker* and his family, come down this week. The first thing they did was to stick on spires and horns and all sorts of excres-

cences, and transmogrify the whole building. The Dowager gave us a day or two last week, blooming as ever, and we had Best to meet her, but they didn't make it out! Rosy's wedding fixed for next month. We are going to town about her present to-morrow, and wish you were here to give us the benefit of your taste. Wife's love: she's all right again now, thanks, and says you are not to go and get *gray*.—I am, dear Phil, yours affectionately, SAUFFRENDEN.

"*P.S.*—When *are* you coming home?

"*P.S.*—Who do you think are coming to stay with us, but the *T's!*"

This was the letter which the English mail brought Philip Wellwood; and which he received lying on his bed under the waving punkah, gazing on the far, far distant peaks of the Himalayas, weary of the eternal sunshine, feeling sick and cross, and ill at ease with all around him.

The letter was not to his mind. He did wish Sauffrenden could write a decent letter. What pleasure could a letter like that afford anybody? There were such lots of things he might have said instead of spending his time over that rubbish of Smith's house, and the *T's*.

The *T's* at Sauffrenden certainly was a revolution, but even a revolution is sometimes hardly worth a postscript.

Nevertheless, he sent a postscript back. "Pray remember me to the ladies at Freelands."

By-and-by Sauffrenden wrote again. "The Tolletons"—no longer the *T's*—"have been with us at Brighton. Helen made a sensation there, I can tell you."

"I daresay she did," thought Philip. "If that fool Balmaine had seen her, he might have talked of a pretty girl. But, good heavens! Louise O'Flinn! They would rave about a she-ape out here."

It was soon after this that Philip discovered he was tired of the Himalayas.

Spring was come again; and he thought of the cool rustle of the leaves in an English valley; of the shining winding river; the busy little town; his old friends and his old ways; and felt himself home-sick.

His little place was sold, but he would go to Sauffrenden if they would have him.

Accordingly one still June evening he drove along the familiar road.

New things met his eye at every turn.

There was a new gate, and a new approach; and newest of all there was a little white bundle being carried in state up and down the flowery terrace, for whose appearance he had indeed been prepared, but which nevertheless gave him a shock.

And he was just as strange to them.

Trivial alterations to which they had long grown accustomed caught his eye.

He wanted to know where this had gone, and when that had come? At every turn it was "Oh, was *that* not before you left?" and "You must recollect this, it has been here so long."

He remembered forgotten stories. He quoted old sayings. He revived the things that had passed away.

Sauffrenden felt that, come what might, he never could let his Philip go again.

"It's delightful to have you back again, old boy, give us your fist," said he, times without number. "And now," he added, as the hour of luxury came, when the two strolled out into the twilight, and floating on the fragrant clouds confidences passed; "now, you must not go away again, never no more, as the books say. Bengal may be all very fine, but you have done it thoroughly, and will never need to blow off your steam again. Take example by me, settle down among us, and have a wife and boy of your own."

"Hear him!" cried Philip. "As if wives and boys to order grew on every tree! By the by, that boy of yours, as you call him, little white bundle of night-shirt as I call him, he is an innovation. I don't approve of innovations. I meant to find you all exactly as I left you, and he upsets the whole order of things."

"But is he not a delightful little wretch? Nurse declares he knew me to-day, and I really think he did. He has got our carroty locks, too. And you wouldn't have the old place go away from us? I can tell you I didn't like the idea of that at all, neither did Milly. How do you think she is looking?"

"Very well indeed. Never saw her look better in my life."

"That's what every one says," delighted.

"The fact is, you know," confidentially, "she has never been well before. She's all right now. And we're going to have a run in the Percys' yacht by-and-by. Take the little un with us. He is three months old now, and nurse thinks the sea-air would be grand for him. But I don't know. What if he should be sick?"

Philip's great "haw, haw," sounded up to Lady Sauffrenden's bedroom.

"You'll make a rare good father, old fellow. One would think you had been in the nursery all your life. Do you consult this oracle every day?"

"You would, too, if you had one of your own."

"Which I have no prospect of having."

"No? None? Really and truly? Then we'll begin and look you out a mate at once. If we don't, you'll be slipping off again. Let me see. There's Helen, my paragon Helen, and Freelands is hers now; you would be close by. But perhaps she wouldn't suit you; and besides, I am pledged to Fred."

"By the way," said Philip, "I have never asked after the Tolletons."

"Ah! you might have asked after them slap out before Milly, now. The most wonderful change in that quarter. She and Helen can't see enough of each other."

"No! Wonders never cease."

"I told you they came here, didn't I?"

"Yes, but that was all."

"Oh, but it isn't all, by any means. It began by little and little, but lately it has grown like Alice in Wonderland."

"And what made the difference?"

"She's different, that's the thing. I can't tell you how, but every one knows. She's not like the same creature; she's become, you know"—lowering his voice—"so very religious."

"Religious!"

"And all that sort of thing. And Milly swears by her. Whatever Helen tells her, she'll do. It's no sham—it's a fact. Wait till you see for yourself. And, by Jove! she's handsomer than ever. Fred's poor penniless heart is set upon her, but they'll have to wait."

"They are engaged, then?"

"Nothing of the sort, nor can be. He can barely keep himself; but we are trying to get a good thing for him, and if we manage it, he will be at her feet to-morrow."

"And will she have him?"

"I don't know; I suppose so. He's a capital fellow. We'll take them in the yacht, and you too, if you'll come. The only pity is they couldn't live here, and Freelands is a nice place. However, it would be just the thing for you, now that you have a few thousands more, and we'll look you out a wife in no time."

"No hurry; the other affair isn't settled yet."

"Well, we shall hear in a week, and I don't think B. would refuse me."

"But that is only the preliminary. How do you know she cares for him?"

"I tell you I don't know; I only suppose so. She never was the girl to show her likings or dislikings unless she chose, and now she wouldn't flirt with a parson."

"Oh!"

A pause.

"How are the others?"

"Carry's married, you know. She goes along with Helen in everything, and the consequence is that she bagged the very first curate who came in Rodney's place. Rodney has got a living, not much of one, but still an advance—somewhere in Devonshire. I don't think Lily half likes the new state of things. She takes herself off whenever she can. She was always the worst of the three."

"That she was!" said Philip, with a vivid recollection of Lily's eye upon him, in olden times. "Is she here now?"

"I don't know. No, of course she is not; for Helen is to come up here to-morrow, because she's alone. We asked Fred to meet her, but he could not get away. She will be with us a week, at least. Ah, what a pity it is, it isn't you!"

But need we tell the reader that it *was* him? That before the week was over, Fred's chance, if he had ever had one, was blown to the winds? That Lord and Lady Sauffrenden, cruel people, threw over their poor cousin

without a pang, and declared that all along Philip and Helen had been made for each other?

And what with the little boat that only held two, and the little paths that were only broad enough for two, and the evening strolls, and the nightingales, and the glow-worms, and the thousand and one other sweet influences which were brought to bear—there was no resisting the speed with which they were hurried along to their destiny.

A week! Helen stayed three. Lord Sauffrenden would have been deeply hurt if the matter had been concluded anywhere but under his own roof, or on his own grounds; and having caught and caged his birds, he closed every aperture of escape.

So it came to pass that one balmy night, when they had all been out under the cedars, and the scent of the sweet syringas had been almost too luscious, that Helen came in, in her white gown, and stood before her friend.

"And she never looked more beautiful in her life," narrated Milly. "So I knew in a moment it had happened. And I was as glad as if she had been my own sister!"

But what a poor match it was thought for her by the people of Eastworld, the Bartletts, the Bains, and the Hunts!

How appropriate a moral they drew! How pleased they were!

A poor thing she had made of it, after all!

After the fine company she had been meeting at the Castle, and the fuss about her at Brighton.

To have to take up with her old flame, Philip Wellwood!

That was what girls came to, in spite of their looks, when they didn't know how to behave themselves. Give them good manners instead of good looks, any day.

And after the way she had caught that poor Mr Smith, and taken in even Lady Sauffrenden.

She changed! Yes, there was a mighty change, no doubt. She was clever enough for anything.

Lily was the only one with a grain of honesty in her composition, and she remained what she always was.

And Mrs Hunt let it be understood, though not in so many words, that she would have considered it a sin and a

shame, not to say a great injustice on the part of Providence, if in the long-run Helen had been rewarded with a rich husband.

Providence had more than once appeared to be on the eve of committing this enormity, but the danger had passed by, and with Philip Wellwood she was sourly satisfied.

"They'll have to scrapple along as best they can," said she. "His fine relations will do nothing for him, I'll be bound. And her ten thousand won't go as far as she thinks, with all his extravagant army habits. It is lucky for them she has the house. Old Tolleton's dropping off as he did, cleared the way for both her and Carry. My lord Wellwood did not forget that when he came forward, we may be sure."

When she said this, she little dreamed that "my lord Wellwood" was soon to be my Lord Wellwood in earnest, you understand.

When that day came, a veil had best be drawn over Mrs Hunt's feelings. Never but once in her life before had she experienced such a shock; and we all know when that was.

"Helen," said her lover, one evening in the bow window, a few days before their marriage, "you must try to teach me the lesson you have learnt since first I knew you. What has made the difference? For you *are* different, you know," said he, drawing her towards him; "tell me about it."

"I knew once," she answered, "a simple, noble Christian gentleman——"

"That will do," said Philip, softly. "I know. Mr Smith."

THE END.

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